

# **WHERE ART MEETS LIFE IN SECRET: EXCAVATING SUBJECTS IN SELECTED WORKS OF MICHAEL ONDAATJE**

By

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## **Declaration**

**I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis consist of my own original work, and that I have not previously in its entirety, or in part, submitted it at any university for a degree.**

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**Signature: D. J. Amid**

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**Date**

## Abstract

In re-imagining the relationship between words and life, or alternately between self and world, the novelist is in a unique position not merely to reproduce these interlinked relationships through the practice of writing, but to use the unique possibilities extended by the form and content of the novel as literary genre to reveal this interpenetration of ontological and epistemological domains; to render visible what is normally regarded as separate. To disclose how the imaginative domain of fiction writing mirrors the *novelistic* character of material reality, this dissertation discusses three Michael Ondaatje works, *The English Patient*, *Anil's Ghost* and *Divisadero*. Through a careful close reading it explores the manner in which Ondaatje's form of philosophical thought juxtaposes many genres and expressive forms into a highly complex, playful and self-referential metafictional whole. With a focus on close reading supplemented rather than determined by critical theory, this dissertation then sets out to demonstrate how the author's work advances the provocative central thesis that fictional texts not only reflect upon events, thoughts and emotions, but that philosophical works of literature and art are necessarily *performative* and *interrogative*, able to question aspects of the self, and ultimately able to present ethical ways of being and therapeutic escape to readers.

## Opsomming

Deur die voorstelling van die verhouding tussen woorde en die lewe, of alternatiewelik tussen self en wêreld, is die outeur uniek geposisioneer om nie net hierdie verwickelde verhoudings deur die skryfproses weer te gee nie, maar ook om die unieke moontlikhede wat die roman as literêre genre bied, te ontgin. Eenvoudig gestel, die vorm en inhoud van die roman maak dit moontlik om hierdie wisselwerking van ontologiese en epistemologiese gebiede oop te vleë, om wat gewoonlik as afsonderlik beskou word, te beklemtoon en op die voorgrond te plaas. Om dan ten toon te stel hoe die verbeeldingryke gebied van fiksieskryfwerk die *roman*-karakter van die materiële werklikheid weerspieël, fokus hierdie studie op 'n bespreking van drie werke van Michael Ondaatje, naamlik *The English Patient*, *Anil's Ghost* en *Divisadero*. Deur kritiese stiplees ondersoek hierdie verhandeling die wyse waarop Ondaatje se konkretisering van abstrakte en filosofiese idees teenoor verskeie ander genres en beeldende denkvorme geplaas word, en sodoende 'n self-verwysende, uiters komplekse metafiktiewe geheel skep. Hierdie studie fokus op stiplees van die tekste, maar word ook aangevul deur literêre en filosofiese teorie. Uiteindelik poog hierdie studie om uit te beeld hoe die outeur se werk die uitdagende argument dat fiksie nie net gebeurtenisse, denke en emosies bepeins nie, maar dat filosofiese en literêre tekste en kunsvorme noodwendig *dramatisierend* en *ondersoekend* is. Tekste soos dié van Ondaatje beskik dan oor die vermoëns om eienskappe van die self te bevraagteken, en om eendelike etiese vorme van menswees en terapeutiese ontvlugting aan lesers te bied.

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## Introduction

### **“Where Art meets Life in Secret”: Border-Crossings, Narrative Craft and the Language of the Novel**

For, let us not fool ourselves; the world is written first — the holy books say it was created in words, and all that happens in it, happens in language first.

— Dzevad Karahasan

But there was a discipline, it was just that we didn't understand. We thought he was formless, but I think now he was tormented by order, what was outside it...

— Michael Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter*

In *The Transformation of Postcolonial Identity from Commonwealth through Postcolonial Literature: The Cases of Nadine Gordimer, Michael Ondaatje and David Malouf* (2006), Lamia Tayeb asserts that “[t]he skilful orchestration of texts and contexts, forms and ideas, words and worlds remain a major source of tension and challenge in contemporary literary production,” and that “[w]hat is needed are novels that aspire to the greatness of art and its relevance to life” (103-4). Tayeb also notes “the tension [in Michael Ondaatje’s work] between the personal and the political,” “played out on the borders of the category of fictionality itself” (96). Closely correlated to such a “need” for novels that reflect “the greatness of art” and “its relevance to life,” Karahasan’s provocative assertion that “the world is written first” and “created in words” foregrounds the role of the writer as someone who works “on the border of the category of fictionality itself” to make sense of the world.

By highlighting the “construction” of the world and by drawing our attention to the “language” of the novel, meeting both the technical needs of narrative while delivering imaginative commentary on the outside world, Karahasan’s words help us to consider the links between written words and a “written world”; between a view of books as “holy” or sacred and the authorial bodies that give them life. Karahasan’s comment is moreover a useful elucidation of Sri-Lankan born Canadian author and poet Michael Ondaatje’s work, representing a view of the world as “written,” constructed through language yet personified through various intimate relationships. A prolific poet with a more measured output of fictional novels, Ondaatje in my view is a superb, subtle writer with an unrivalled ability to comment on real world issues and concerns while continuously bringing the importance of the literary to the fore. I am struck consistently by Ondaatje’s graceful turn of phrase and terrific sense of humour, his willingness to engage with difficult subject matter (war, trauma,

dislocation, memory, life-writing), and juxtaposition of various points of view, fragmented, a-chronological storytelling, and the arresting intermixing of genres.

It is apparent that critics too have for years paid attention to these admittedly important features of his work. Various monographs such as *Michael Ondaatje: Express Yourself Beautifully* by Ed Jewinski (1994), *Ragas of Longing: The Poetry of Michael Ondaatje* by Sam Solecki (2003), Annick Hillger's *Not Needing All the Words: Michael Ondaatje's Literature of Silence* (2006), Joan Elizabeth Von Memerty's *Michael Ondaatje: Distance, Clarity and Ghosts* (2009), and, most recently, *Michael Ondaatje* by Lee Spinks, have examined the writer's work under broad categories that we can classify as Romantic, Neo-Modernist, Postmodern or Postcolonial, while many critics and their scholarly articles have chosen to focus on specific elements that make up Ondaatje's eclectic narrative craft.

In the article "The Chronotopes of Mongrel Literatures: Rushdie, Ondaatje, Naipaul, and the Problems of Postcoloniality," Anthony R. Guneratne contends that "a preoccupation with the fragility of human lives and the bodies that contain them" characterises Ondaatje's work, and that "[t]he universality of his themes is traceable to his fascination with Gilgamesh, which he regards as the first work of fiction" (6). Unlike those "engaged in the pursuit of a great cause or a grand design, as are those of Stendhal, Kipling, or Conrad", Ondaatje's characters are "ordinary people plunged into extraordinary situations" (Guneratne 6). Such a perceptive reading of Ondaatje's work foregrounds the writer's fascination with fragile "human lives" and various concomitant traumas of the body and psyche disclosed in early writings such as *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970) and *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976).

Guneratne's reading of Ondaatje also sheds light on the writer's intertextual engagement with mythical narratives such as the Epic of Gilgamesh in his novel *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), and with the works of other writers such as the three authors mentioned above. While critics often impose a postcolonial paradigm onto both *The English Patient* and Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (1997), a novel about the Sri Lankan Civil War which recently ended after two decades of internecine warfare, Victoria Cook claims that Ondaatje's words "move beyond interpretation as a postcolonial literature of "resistance" to challenge traditional perceptions of "self" and "other", incorporating a transgressing of boundaries in a way that invites interrogation from transnational perspectives" (6, my emphasis).

Many scholars have sought to examine Ondaatje's narrative craft, and the ways in which the writer employs the formal and thematic freedom that the novel provides to great effect. In their essay "The English Patient and His Narrator": 'Opener of the Ways,' Janis Haswell and Elaine Edwards appropriately deem Michael Ondaatje a "modern-day Chaucer" and the "master of reflexive narrative" (122). In "Michael Ondaatje: Cat Burglar in the House of Fiction", Todd Kliman notes how "[r]eader's expectations are continually held hostage" as



Ondaatje “explodes convention”, with an ultimate “reason” and “order” to his “madness” (1). Correspondingly, and perhaps most perspicaciously, Sam Solecki argues, “[a]ll art, for that matter, is self-conscious... Ondaatje now has to be on the border where the craft meets the accidental and the unconscious, as close as possible to the unconscious” (22).

Solecki’s quote not only synthesises to a large degree Haswell and Edwards and Kliman’s recognition of the “self-conscious” artistry embedded within and embodied by Ondaatje’s words, but points us towards the writer’s *border-crossing* narrative craft, which conjoins the “accidental” and the “unconscious” parts of life and the self with the artifice that renders it materially resonant. For Ondaatje, the artform able to capture most successfully “reason” and “madness” is the imaginative space of the novel, where imagination and reality meet. In re-imagining the relationship between words and life, or alternately between self and world, the *novelist* is in a unique position not merely to reproduce these interlinked relationships through the practice of writing, but to use the unique possibilities extended by the novel as literary genre to *reveal* this interpenetration of ontological and epistemological domains, to render visible what is normally regarded as separate.

Through the documentation of individual experience and interior life, Ondaatje is able to recognise the powerfully interlinked nature of social practices, the bodies that carry them, the formal qualities of texts, and the thematic preoccupations that are carried by literary forms. In this sense he converges with a critical tradition that can be broadly termed “poststructuralist”, but it would be a mistake to reduce his position to a philosophical one: his point is precisely that the novel is uniquely capable of achieving such a metafictional critique because it can, through narration, locate ideas in the world and in the bodies that give rise to them. Correspondingly, I firstly set out in this dissertation to build on the foundation of previous Ondaatje scholarship by focussing specifically, though not exclusively, on the writer’s three most recent works, *The English Patient*, *Anil’s Ghost*, and *Divisadero*, works that have as of yet not been studied in tandem, with *Divisadero* particularly in need of critical reflection.

The relationship between staging and secrecy in Ondaatje’s aesthetic of intimacy is at the forefront of my literary investigation, and the connections the author illuminates between forms of disclosure and concealment in his writing practice are central to my discussion of the three novels in question. I chose to use the word ‘secret’ in the title of my dissertation specifically because of the connotations of the word “secret”, evocative of the confidential, mysterious, opaque and a sense of the undisclosed. The title of this dissertation, “Where Art meets Life in Secret”, in my view draws attention to Ondaatje’s view of the novel as a form of material and symbolic archaeology and revelation. The title foregrounds the status of the novel as a cultural artefact able to stage and represent the intersection between art and life, between written words and the “written” world. This dissertation takes art to be a creative mode of expression that appeals both to the senses and human emotions, and life as the

course of human actions between birth and death, the motions and events that give meaning to the world. My formulation “where art meets life in secret” – taken from Ondaatje’s *Divisadero* (144) – encompasses these assertions while adding an intimate sense of the aporetic nature of Ondaatje’s texts, and of the “secretive” relationship between corporeal bodies and symbolic bodies of thought.

Since the Ondaatje oeuvre consists of different books and different chapters, a unique intertextuality reveals how the three novels in this study are very different, yet unmistakably bear Ondaatje’s signature. To disclose how the imaginative domain of fiction writing mirrors the *novelistic* character of material reality in the sense, I explore the manner in which Ondaatje’s material form of philosophical thought juxtaposes many genres and expressive forms into a cohesive whole. Through a careful close reading, with my focus on close reading first and foremost and supplemented rather than determined by critical theory, I then set out to demonstrate how the author’s work advances the provocative central thesis that fictional texts not only reflect upon events, thoughts and emotions, but that philosophical works of literature and art are necessarily *performative* and *interrogative*, able to question aspects of the self, and present healing and therapeutic escape to readers.

Therefore, what I offer is not another deconstructive reading of Ondaatje, showing how his works echo one or the other “postmodern” or “postcolonial” aphorism. On the contrary, through a close reading, I show how he uses the novel form in order to pose these questions in a new and urgent way that also extends them. To make that argument, I proceed to explain why and how social practices, the body, texts and authors can be said to be linked, by offering brief examples from Ondaatje, with a promise of more to come in future chapters. I proceed to map what it is about the novel form, and particularly the way that Ondaatje employs it, that gives it the power to “read” these connections so well. Subsequently, I proclaim my own reading practice: in other words, how I recognise the specificity of Ondaatje’s work, to its interrogative but also profoundly ethical and healing qualities.

In his fictionalised memoir, *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje writes, “I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner” (65). Subsequently, John Bolland’s guide to *The English Patient* notes that Ondaatje’s displaced status has led to “a tension in his thought and writing: – between an identification with the figure of the outsider – whose marginality is the source of a powerful, if anarchic, creative energy and integrity of vision – and an equally felt need for belonging” (9). Ondaatje’s awareness of and concentration towards outsiders in his fiction is arguably influenced by his own migration to Canada and desire to grasp his Sri Lankan family’s cultural hybridity years after his Sri Lankan birth and British education in England. Ondaatje’s emergence as a writer during the 1970s can be tied to the surfacing of a group of writers that Linda Hutcheon includes in her study *The Canadian Postmodern* (1988). This group includes Leonard Cohen, Robert Kroetsch, Margaret Atwood, and Alice Munro,

bound by their recognition of marginal voices in a historical period where French and British influences on Canadian nationalism and identity were repeatedly questioned (Bolland 13).

When we connect a writer's life to the life of his texts, it is particularly pressing to heed the literary environment and context in which the writer's work came into being. In his seminal text *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), Michel Foucault argues that "[c]ontinuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject: the guarantee that everything that has eluded him may be restored to him; the certainty that time will disperse nothing without restoring it to a reconstituted unity" (158). Correspondingly, recent literary theory has associated the postmodern with a loss of faith in metanarratives; a distrust of universalist assumptions and crisis of legitimation; a recognition of the fragmented and fragmenting nature of current realities; and the need to focus attention on the trans-cultural, inter-disciplinary and marginal as spheres of influence speaking back to the "centre." Whereas realist fiction sought to provide the reader with such an impression of "restoration," "certainty" and "unification," postmodern fiction undermines the sense of "continuous history" in its disclosure of discordant realities, with the concomitant lack of epistemological or ontological certainty characteristic of a fragmented and unstable view of identity and consciousness exemplified by notions of the "decentred subject." Simultaneously, it then makes sense that the novel's closely inter-related formal structure and content will be equally resistant to causal progression and linearity.

As Linda Hutcheon notes in *The Canadian Postmodern*, "[history is no longer] to be accepted as 'how things actually happened'... [but] as a construction, as having been made by the historian through a process of selecting, ordering and narrating" (14-15). Correspondingly, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon asserts that historiographic metafiction "both install and blur the line between fiction and history" (113) as works that simultaneously appear as a part of historical discourse and as works of fiction. Since these texts criticise the potential of narrative realism to provide access to unmediated truth, they ultimately investigate the disjunctures between the written and spoken word, between the historical and the remembered, and between individual memory and communal history, fact and fiction. Just as historiography notes such a "making" of history, historiographic metafiction (which Ondaatje is a prime proponent of) is able to engage meaningfully in debates about the world and its own place as a material object inseparable from the world.

The current postmodern context of literary production and consumption speaks directly to Foucault's conclusion in his essay "What is an Author?", where he argues that our conception of the author-function will all but disappear and that the author as final and official arbiter of meaning will be displaced by an ultimately "authorless" discourse (119). This concept draws attention to the construction of the dissertation around the figure of Ondaatje and the author, most specifically addressed in Chapter 4. I want to argue that the polyphonic discursive space

of the *novel* is able to capture a variety of narrative voices, and the fragmentation and open-endedness that Ondaatje argues is definitive of everyday life. The novel as Ondaatje employs it is then able to gesture towards the permeable, malleable boundaries between fact and fiction, and concomitantly able to frame the “novelistic” grounds of existence and experience outside the borders of the text.

My contention is that Ondaatje acts as literary cartographer, archaeologist and historiographer. These endeavours rest on the implicit and explicit connection between body and text, which would include the body of the living, breathing author and the words that were penned by his hand. Ondaatje’s works are characterised by the striking presence of corporeal bodies in various. With the centrality of various bodies of thought in Ondaatje’s fiction writing, one can read the body in his fictions as both a functional literary-philosophical representational form superordinately signifying embodied traces of subjectivity and being in the world, and, more simply, as the *implied* physical presence and corresponding title or name of a person. The work of Jean-Luc Nancy is particularly helpful concerning the reading of the representational qualities of bodies in fiction. Nancy argues:

[L]iterature offers us one of three things: either fiction which is by definition *bodiless*, with its author whose body is *absent* (in fact we are imprisoned in his cave, where he gives us the spectacle of bodies) or bodies covered with signs [...] or else writing itself abandoned or erect like a *signifying body* – In this way we do not leave the horizon of the sign, of sense and of mimesis. Literature mimes the body, or makes the body mime signification, or mimes itself as body. (193, my emphasis)

This lucid yet nevertheless complex formulation rests on our understanding of the body as a corporeal, material presence that cannot fully be captured or disclosed on the page. It rests also on our recognition that “fiction” and the space of literature simultaneously makes this fact clear while “miming” the character or form of something it cannot fully signify. While recent post-structuralist scholarship has moved away from criticism that valorised notions of authorial intent or intentionality of the author above all other readings of the text, we must paradoxically turn to the “absent” body of the author (more particularly to his “bodiless” body of *ideas*) to obtain a greater understanding of the works in question in this dissertation, three works that continuously blur the boundaries between the “horizon of the sign, of sense and of mimesis”, and the “reality” of the world outside the borders of the text.

Thomas J. Csordas make the crucial distinction between the body and embodiment, equivalent to Barthes’s distinction between textuality and text. Whereas Barthes argues that the text can be viewed as the material object that takes its place in the archive or the bookshelf while textuality figures as the indeterminate *discursive field* we enter when we read, the body can be thought of as a “biological material entity and embodiment as an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and by mode of

presence and engagement with the world” (*Embodiment and Cultural Phenomenology* 145). Such an “engagement with the world” concretises experience in book form through language, and through the “language” of the book. Although language is limited in its capacity to express lived experience, and similarly not wholly constitutive of experience itself, it nevertheless provides an aperture to experience the world first-hand (Csordas, *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self* 11).

The writer can similarly be seen to reside symbolically and liminally between the domains of the “fictional” and the “real”, between the text and the world. Barthes argues that the author is indeed reduced to a “dead” presence “undone” by the act of reading itself (142-148), while Foucault provides us with a notion of authorship that substitutes the material void and lack of the author’s body with the name we conventionally assume to take its place. While I return to Foucault’s conception of the author-function during my discussion of *Divisadero*, it is important to note how Foucault conceives of the author’s name as a practical tool. Foucault writes that the author’s name, unlike the proper names of others,

does not pass from the interior of a discourse to the real or the exterior individual who produced it, instead the name always seems to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing or at least characterising its mode of being. The author’s name manifests a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and its cultures. (“What is an Author?” 120)

Because “Michael Ondaatje” is the author-name behind the production of the three novels I discuss in this dissertation, simultaneously “always present” and a “real or exterior individual” who for all practical purposes is out of reach, his name fulfils the Foucauldian author-function by “revealing or at least characterising” the “mode of being” or “status” of *The English Patient*, *Anil’s Ghost* and *Divisadero* as literary works. I contend that the acknowledgements and Author’s Notes that respectively frame the novels at beginning and end disclose a sense of the murky reality that informs these works of fiction. Furthermore, our mode of *reception* of such a metafictional mode of production must greet the ways in which real lives and corporeal bodies become fragmented, dismembered and re-membered as “edges of the text”, before being symbolically re-configured through a literary “vigil” powered by the written word and the readerly imagination. Such a project then imbues Ondaatje’s aesthetic with a striking desire to place the lives and stories of those suppressed by power at the forefront of our reading experience, gradually shifted away from the peripheral “edge”.

In this instance, “Ondaatje” as the author’s name helps to direct us as we aim to find a productive way into his literary texts. Since the personal name speaks to a corporeal body that experiences the real world, one that proceeds to create a text that moves from a material reality into the domain of the symbolic, we are able to trace a parallel body of work as it

relates to the real person behind the name, with works necessarily cultural, historically-located and embedded in discursive formations. Ondaatje inscribes his own “real” presence and that of other real corporeal bodies and lives into the text by various authorial interventions, acknowledgements and Author’s Notes. Consequently, it is important to acknowledge the crucial insight that *interviews*, as the illuminating revelations of meaning regarding both the writer’s body of work, his creative process and life-story can provide. We must also remain vigilant to the fact that mechanisms of call and response, prompting and answering essentially define and structure interviews, and that these insights can never take the place of our own sensitive and probing examinations of an author’s body of work.

In an interview with Dave Welch, Ondaatje reveals how the novel allows him to continuously argue with himself, while noting that he continuously revisits in successive works what is left incomplete or unsaid in the preceding work (Welch 2, see also Dafoe 16). On a related note, Ondaatje’s very Nietzschean insistence that writing is essentially autobiographical is revealed in an interview with Brian D. Johnson: “With all writers, there’s an element of self-investigation and self-portrait. Even in their fiction that’s supposedly not about them at all” (Ondaatje and Johnson 40). In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Ondaatje said, “I don’t believe stories are told from A to Z anymore” (254), while an interview with Catherine Bush points to the importance of figurative language in Ondaatje’s novels, and the sense of *fateful ellipsis* that often accompanies his writings and excavation of subjects:

I think there are plots that can take place without people moving an inch. Plot comes out of the *language* as much as it comes out of the *described event*. The scenes in the books of mine that I like the most are often the scene where nothing happens, where the guy’s just *waiting* or *thinking* – Patrick on a train going north in *In the Skin of a Lion*, Billy in a barn before the rats appear, my father driving up to Kegalle alone in his car at night after meeting with my mother in the Thanikama chapter of *Running in the Family*. Quite often I don’t want to complete the plot, I keep postponing it... There’s an element of not wanting to move into that final room where a character meets his fate. (Bush 240, my emphasis)

In another part of this fascinating interview, Ondaatje discloses how his novels operate in “symbolic time”, how his works of fiction attempt to capture “a kind of sensory emotion”, and how they continuously blur the boundaries between the past and present to document the “whole” of what can only be told through fragments:

[A] whole life is compressed into two hundred pages. So every action or thought that occurs leaps back to what a character was and leaps forward to what he or she might become. It’s the complexity that this range of time produces that makes the characters thick or real in the novel... ” (Bush 242)

In the aforementioned interview with Brian D. Johnson, Ondaatje also provides a revealing disclosure of the “leap of invention” that belies his narrative craft, and how he uses the elements of “non-fiction” and “fiction” to bring his thoughts in the “non-fiction world” into the domain of the “fictional”: “The non-fiction is the content in a way, and the shaping or the form is the fiction... Every section of a book I write begins in the non-fiction world. And then you bring in a character, something like Kip defusing a bomb in *The English Patient*” (40). Similarly, in a reflective piece regarding *Anil’s Ghost* entitled “Pale Flags”, Ondaatje recognises how the material stands before the ideal in his narrative craft, how his ideas and fictions have their genesis in material objects: “No ideas but in things,” William Carlos Williams said about poetry, and I feel it is utterly true for fiction” (“Pale Flags” 62).

Ondaatje reflects on the creative process of Jazz and its reliance on a sense of community in an interview with Maya Jaggi: “What I love is its *communal form*, how it is completely free and improvisational and still everything is held together. It is made by a group as opposed to an individual and this really interests me. I believe books are *communal acts*” (8). I believe that Ondaatje embraces the communal philosophy of Jazz and embodies its communal ethos in the material form of the novel. This view of books as “communal acts” allows the author to be “completely free,” “improvisational,” and “hold everything together” through certain patterns that repeat throughout his work. Consequently, Ondaatje’s form of literary art becomes communal and democratic through its recognition of the real and historical lives that influence and form the backbone of his archaeological excavations of different kinds of experience, knowledge and truth. The necessary connection between the self and the other, and between the individual and the domain of art in Ondaatje’s writings reverberates in Ondaatje’s remark to Eleanor Wachtel, which states that “[w]riting links up one’s own life with the history of our time, which may go back to the fourth century. You place yourself against the cave wall, where hundreds of years of art have been inscribed, then you link yourself to it in some way” (257).

As Foucault suggests in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), “[t]o analyse the formation of concepts, one must relate them neither to the horizon of ideality, nor to the empirical progress of ideas (63). The patterns of meaning and form in Ondaatje’s works must therefore be analysed while mindful of the intentional fragmentation of narrative, the opacity of consciousness and the open-ended and indeterminate sense of language, fully aware of the Ondaatje’s intentional manipulation of chronology and linear time to dramatise a (dis)continuous, performative and “novelistic” sense of reality and lived experience. Ondaatje’s writing thus fulfils a transgressive, boundary-crossing imperative to make sense of the “reality” of the world through the fictional domain of the novel, where inter-connections and relationships between bodies and between lives lived and lives imagined can be disclosed.

Although Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), Lucien Goldmann's *Towards a Sociology of the Novel* (1964), Georg Lukacs in both *The Historical Novel* and *Theory of the Novel* (1920 and 1937 respectively) and Milan Kundera in *Art of the Novel* (1986) have, amongst others, framed and discussed the novel as a particular generic form and mode of expression imbued with social and often political significance, the Russian scholar, philosopher and semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin arguably offers us a model to anticipate Ondaatje's own form of novel writing. Bakhtin's conceptions of the "chronotope", "heteroglossia" and "dialogism" captured in his collection of four essays entitled *The Dialogic Imagination*, translated and published in 1975, are useful theoretical starting points before we turn to Ondaatje's own novelistic aesthetic.

In "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," Bakhtin defines the chronotope, which can literally be translated and defined as "time-space," as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (84). "Heteroglossia," in turn, is defined by Bakhtin as

the base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance. It is that which insures the primacy of context over text. At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions — social, historical, meteorological, physiological — that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions; all utterances are heteroglot in that they are functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve. Heteroglossia is as close a conceptualisation as is possible of that locus where centripetal and centrifugal forces collide; as such, it is that which a systematic linguistics must always suppress. (268)

The conceptions link closely to Bakhtin's idea of "dialogism", which encapsulates his view of language and the novel as "dialogic", bringing together various voices, speech patterns and dialects with(in) language, the individual and society, and the social and the ideological. In order to create literature and meaning in the novel, the writer correspondingly employs the "reality" of familiar "temporal and spatial relationships" to order the world of the novel, to locate a "truthful" or recognisable intersection between time and space that we are able to read as mimetic of configurations of the world outside the novel's borders. Akin to the way that these concepts relating to the multiplicity of language, the organisation and ultimate open-endedness of linguistic expression, and the interconnection of time and space come together in the novel's ultimately open-ended and indeterminate universe, Ondaatje's view of the novel similarly foregrounds its function as a substantive material technology. Such a technological form stages not only the dialogic or heteroglot intersection between various voices, but functions as a meta-linguistic and meta-fictional instrument of self-reflection and discovery, detection and innovation.



While the “reality” of fiction is able to produce and project its *own* kind of truth into the world of the reader, this “truth” cannot be empirically verified but only imagined, interrogated and assimilated into our daily lives. The “fiction” of the novel is thus the lens through which we are able to make sense of the “truth of our times” (*Anil’s Ghost* 126). Given that the novel’s signal strength is its ability to cross both time and space to suggest both states of chaos and order, Ondaatje’s cinematic narrative craft is able to move between various vantage points. This is done in order to synthesise Romanticism’s focus on individual and embodied experience and the relationship between self and world with the formal experimentalism with chronology, perspective and focus on individual consciousness of Modernism. Ondaatje’s narrative craft is also able to blend these apparently disparate elements with the Postcolonial focus on marginalised voices and subaltern stories, and is able to *perform* the fragmentation, self-reflexivity, mistrust of meta-narratives and historiographical focus of Postmodernism.

Ondaatje conceives of art as a simultaneously public and private domain, with the novel “personifying” the paradoxical synthesis of creation and destruction harnessed by its form and content, like “great stars” “straining to the centre/that would explode their white/if temperature and the speed they moved at/shifted one degree”( *Collected Works* 41). Consequently, one can argue that the novel is thus uniquely positioned to assimilate aspects of lived experience, while these fragmentary descriptions ultimately coalesce to provide metatextual commentary on the writing process, defined by the “telling” of life-stories. In the three main chapters of this dissertation, I proceed to argue that Ondaatje’s themes and formal writing centre on an excavation of reading and writing subjects and their subjectivity.

The novels of Ondaatje arguably materialise the claim by fellow by Canadian poet and novelist Anne Michaels that “[i]mages brand you, burn the surrounding skin, leave their black mark. Like volcanic ash, they can make the most potent soil. Out of the seared place emerge sharp green roots” (*Fugitive Pieces* 218). Since Ondaatje acknowledges the importance of powerful singular images and ideas as the genesis and basis of his imaginative writing aesthetic, these images become the imaginative springboard for a slowly accumulative writing process where the formal characteristics of the work reflect thematic preoccupations. This fragmentation and open-endedness establishes and mirrors a metafictional “reality” where the writer candidly investigates various concerns.

As someone who has continuously straddled the lines between insider and outsider due to his mixed cultural heritage and educational background, Ondaatje recognises the outsider within all of his characters. With the novels in question all mysteries of identity, investigations into the larger question of what it means to be human, Ondaatje’s novels all invoke acts of discovery, with revelations always on the horizon through forms of remembering, listening and telling. Engaged in an archaeological project of discovery and disclosure, telling and

retelling, *The English Patient*, *Anil's Ghost* and *Divisadero* are set in certain time periods, while their themes transcend boundaries as a study of the universe of character and the empty houses of the heart.

The particular chapters (subdivisions) or sections of a whole in Ondaatje's works foreground individual characters and stories on a private stage. Subsequently, through gradual shifts from larger historical forces and history to more personal, intimate histories, memories and stories, juxtaposition and imaginative interconnection move narratives from the public to the private and back again. Gradually, Ondaatje's sensual, quietly epic narratives reveal the opacity of consciousness, the materiality of existence, and the fragmented, fragmenting process of living through the perspicacious prism of the metafictional novel.

Intent on narrative defamiliarisation, the mixing of biographical truth with fiction and frequent splicing of strictly referential language into the literary blurs distinctions between fact and fiction. This undercuts the Modernist ideal of a clearly mapped out way of seeing the world and literature. By recognising the various forces of division and destruction in human life and everyday existence, Ondaatje seems uncannily aware that the anagram of the word "character" contains earthy or exploratory words such as "reach", "teach", "terra", "crater", "hear" and "trace", alongside the intimate, material connotations of words such as "heart", "catch", "care" and "tear". Thus, it is apparent that the novels map the place of the subject in discourse as much as various themes in Ondaatje's work delineate various subject *matter*.

Correspondingly, Ondaatje's stories have a Biblical quality, dealing with intense personal struggles and the aftermath of various forms of disaster. Unsurprisingly, war is a part of all three novels. While it is central in *Anil's Ghost* as a destructive and disruptive event, in *The English Patient* and *Divisadero* it is largely in the background, intruding during various moments in the texts to show how a fictional reality as constructed in the novel is nevertheless able to show how real wars intrude into the passage of ordinary lives. Characters inhabit ruins and vestiges of violence, be it their own ravaged, pained bodies or ruined landscapes or buildings. The Villa San Girolamo in *The English Patient*, the Grove of Ascetics, the walawwa and Gamini's empty house in *Anil's Ghost*, and the shell of Segura's house in *Divisadero* house wounded characters. It is only in times and moments of solitude that these figures can delve deeper inside their own selves, excavating their deepest sorrows through traumatic memory and storytelling. As a result, *coming through slaughter* is a pervasive theme in Ondaatje's work, one deeply connected to his characters search for healing and community, however temporary it may be.

Although it would appear that *The English Patient*, *Anil's Ghost* and *Divisadero* continue to supplement Ondaatje's "expedition of descent into darkness, horror, a mystical sensuality, fragmentation, and madness", it is also important to acknowledge how Ondaatje's recent

fictions have sought to address the “possibility of return of reintegration, of transcendence or the possible achievement of community (or even more than a momentary communication)” (Marshall 144). In all three texts, particularly *Divisadero*, Ondaatje investigates how we can re-define and re-structure the family in a fragmented world where distance, isolation and disillusionment have grown from supposed propinquity in a “global village” and a proximity to information. Ondaatje refrains from judging the actions of his characters, noting the power of events to reverberate long after the physical wounds have healed.

Fully aware of the limits of language, the subjectivity of representation, and the dislocating nature of war, trauma, death and desire, Ondaatje reveals the paradoxical openings these lived experiences create for communal, intimate and healing relationships. Consequently, through the dialectic of roots and routes – dramatised by the geographical restlessness of characters, reflective of the itinerant nature of the novel itself – notions of affiliation come to represent modalities towards meaningful intimacy, while a new way of looking at the family underscores the collective importance Ondaatje attaches to sites of human connection.

The writer asks how we can be our most human selves while recognising our fate as communal subjects, overcoming the distances and differences that often seem to define our lives and relations to others. Through the search for the character of humanity and the humane, Ondaatje’s somatic sensibility continuously visits new locations and revisits previous characters, scenes, settings and themes, while “apocryphal” stories – mythical, fictional, invented, indeterminate, legendary, as well as being intimate, sensual, self-reflexive and richly detailed – “slip from level from level like a hawk” (*English Patient* 4, 93). We are correspondingly able to undertake a journey to the core of a narrative craft, its divisions, intricacies and intimacies, its patterns and its power.

This voyage it is not about the destination but the journey, its exquisite beauty, its humour, the unexpected detours and philosophical excursions, and the characters we meet along the way. An intimate authorial focus, less on the facticity of narratives but rather on the tactile experience and *telling* of stories, seeks to unearth whether characters will be the heroes of their own lives, able to tell their stories. By looking at situations from various perspectives, Ondaatje’s panoramic worldview holds everything as collage, revealed in a new light through intentional distance and fragmentation. This fragmentation mirrors the narrative trajectory of Ondaatje’s narratives and the nature of memory, moving back and forth, backwards and forwards, as we are never sure where the characters or strands of story will go next.

Because the author views labour as a defining ontological state and site, many characters perform dangerous acts that create or culminate in physical intimacy or moments of connection. At the same time, characters supplement their lives with stories – fictional stories, mythical stories, life-stories. Reading, for Ondaatje, attends on the perception of the world

before a reading of texts. Conversely, Ondaatje muses that the books are come across at certain walks of life and certain times, and that getting your hands on and reading books, reading between the lines, being well-read, and reading into situations are all part of the reading process. Ondaatje stresses both the interrogative reading of actual texts and reading or interpretation of situations outside the borders of the text, and foregrounds the ethical and close reading of the other as a sacred text in need of healing and care.

After such a brief yet kaleidoscopic overview of the basic foundational tenets of Ondaatje's writing in the three novels in question, it is now possible to delineate my focal points for the three chapters that will make up the body of my own argument in this dissertation. In Chapter 2, I discuss *The English Patient* as an "apocryphal story", one with "untrue", mythical, fictional and intertextual qualities, "apocryphal" in relation to conventional forms of historical writing. While examining the closely interconnected themes of (re)construction, reading and relation in *The English Patient*, I contend that Ondaatje employs the novel to write a form of historiographic metafiction. Such a form employs fictional characters as variations of the author-figure in order to re-write the history of WW2 to include marginal voices, untold stories, and various intimate relationships, and these affiliative forms of connection between corporeal bodies counter various forms of destruction and fragmentation.

Chapter 3 builds on the arguments I make in Chapter 2, and I argue here that Ondaatje presents a politically neutral account of the Sri Lankan Civil War in *Anil's Ghost*. I proceed to focus my attention on the prevalent themes of intimacy, violence and (dis)location in order to suggest that Ondaatje ethically reconstructs a fragmented narrative from various stories, and that these narratives give tremendous insight into the ways that the novel is able to make sense of trauma and civil war as both public atrocity and private nightmare. I contend that the novel's powerful indictment of war and violence ultimately foregrounds an argument for the ethical, compassionate close reading of the other as a reflection of the self.

In Chapter 4, I offer a close reading of specific passages from *Divisadero* in order to reflect on the themes of memory, autobiography and story. Since Ondaatje for the first time presents two actual writers in this text, I progress in this chapter towards the central thesis of my reading: that all forms of writing are archaeological and performative; that life-stories and their "construction" are contingent upon the relative interconnection of personal history, memory and fictional stories; and that existence is inherently "novelistic", a gradual process fitting various fragments into a tentative whole. To conclude, I present a summative overview of the main arguments from each chapter, before my final thoughts on Ondaatje and his aesthetic of intimacy brings my discussion to a close.

## Chapter 1

### “An Apocryphal Story”- (Re)construction, Reading and Relation in *The English Patient*

A word is at home in desire. No station of the heart is more full of solitude than desire which keeps the world poised, poisoned with beauty, whose only permanence is loss.

– Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*

Not a story about me through their eyes then. Find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to dig it out. Here then is a maze to begin, be in...

– Michael Ondaatje, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*

No story is ever told just once...

– Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family*

Each person had their moment when they assumed the skins of wild animals, when they took responsibility for the story.

– Michael Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion*

One could argue that Ondaatje's writing is both intimate and corporeal, an exploration of the ways in which close relationships in the fictional domain reflect intimacies in the “real world”. The close relationship the novel establishes with each reader then becomes the lens to make sense of all the *other* relationships in *The English Patient*, where the familiarity between text and reader allows the observation of intimacies between characters. This “familiarity” is, at a most fundamental level, the connection established by the author through the use of suggestive metaphorical language, and begets the active metaphorical immersion into and interpretation of the novel as text. The novel does not just describe the harmful or ameliorative affiliations between people in the fictional domain; it actively *performs* such a connection, or a particular embodied idea of such a connection. To do a close reading of the bonds between people in fiction thus attends, for Ondaatje, on entering an analogous, intimate bond with the text in reality.

To make the analogy persuasive, Ondaatje needs to disclose two things. First, he must show the reader that the other is, at some level, a text that must be read closely in order to be identified, and that a certain practice of textual interpretation mediates and occasions the intimacies between real corporeal people in the world. Second, Ondaatje has to show that a fictional text – which includes the novel *The English Patient* – is at some point *more* than just intangible or allusive meaning, but proceeds from, and relates to, another embodied person, or to other bodies. To read and interpret a book is thus to enter into a deeply personal relationship with another body. This chapter is largely preoccupied with showing, through a detailed close reading of the interconnected themes of (re)construction, reading and relation, how Ondaatje develops and sustains this powerful analogy, and to discuss its implications.

In this chapter, my argumentative logic progresses from the level of *narrative* to the level of *action* – i.e. I first discuss the superordinate role of the text itself, then discuss its spaces (the novel's setting), and then use the ideas generated to show how they play out in the lives of various characters (the novel's characterisation). This logic functions because I claim that the characters in *The English Patient* play a kind of author-role, or reveal different aspects of the idea of authorship & the authority of writing. My discussion of characterisation therefore incessantly links to the novel's form and content, and to the "novelistic" nature of the world. Although I bear in mind the sterling work by Tom Penner in his essay "Four Characters in Search of an Author-Function": Foucault, Ondaatje, and the 'Eternally Dying' Author in *The English Patient*, I proceed to discuss Foucault's conception of the Author-Function – which is somewhat different to my view of character's playing author-roles – in relation to Ondaatje's latest novel *Divisadero*. Because Penner has already produced an illuminating study of the ways in which the four main characters maintain or subvert such notions of the Author-Function in *The English Patient*, I am more concerned here with the ways in which the characters function to deepen my own reading of the novel as "apocryphal story" (EP 93).

Lamia Tayeb contends that "[w]hat [*The English Patient*] seeks to mediate is not the codified content of official history, but to document that which is left out of conventional historiography (100). By writing about history as "apocryphal story" – a combination of the hidden, submerged and not officially sanctioned with the legendary, unconventional, fictional and mythical, I note Ondaatje's privileged ability to comment on history and culture, while I acknowledge his critique of histories that serve power. In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Ondaatje explains the importance of history and its "layers" in *The English Patient*:

Once I got into the desert stuff, and through that to Herodotus, I began picking up a sense of the layers of history... There are churches in Rome that stand on the remains of two or three earlier churches, all built on the same spot. That sense of history, of building overlaid with building was central in my mind – unconsciously I think. (Wachtel 251)

With Ondaatje “picking up” such an “unconscious” sense of history, “of building overlaid with building”, *The English Patient* (re)constructs a multi-layered fictional narrative from real historical records. Through a close reading of the real life-story of Hungarian Count Almásy, an explorer and cartographer known as “the English Patient”, the insistence that “a well told lie is worth a thousand facts” in the author’s fictionalised memoir *Running in the Family* (2006) shows that Ondaatje clearly recognises the “truth-value” of *fiction*. This recognition allows us to read the novel, clearly a fictional account, as in some way preoccupied with historical truth in a more profound way than orthodox history. Accordingly, *The English Patient* exemplifies what Linda Hutcheon terms “Historiographic Metafiction” in her article “‘The Pastime of Past Time’: Fiction, History, Historiographic Metafiction”, roughly defined by the imperative to “re-introduce historical context into metafiction and problematise the entire question of historical knowledge” (Hutcheon 54-55). To add to this conception, Jody Mason notes:

Hutcheon’s theorisation of the “ex-centric” figures of historiographic metafiction, for example, usefully points to the ways in which figures such as the English Patient emphasise the *narrative qualities* of such historical “fact” and the simultaneous, if somewhat contradictory, need for a *rewriting* of historical narratives that *erase marginal experiences*. (67, my emphasis)

Thus, as exemplary form of meta-analysis incorporating “marginal experiences” yet simultaneously aware of the “narrative qualities” of history, *The English Patient* represents a novelistic and apocryphal re-writing of history. Because “[p]eople recover from secret loss variously” (*EP* 253), the novel’s excavation of different stories encapsulates a “strange journey” (*EP* 33) of “preludes and interludes” (23). By excavating esoteric and non-canonical subjects – real people subjected to a form of power but that also speak, and by excavating fictional characters – the novel’s intimate reading of bodies, texts and landscapes and signposting of reading as a gradual process, much like *living*.

Whereas Natania Rosenfeld states that “Michael Ondaatje [is] instructive as a postmodern Romantic yearning for beauty in an era of extreme violations” (350), this quote usefully gestures towards Ondaatje’s postmodern authorship within a romantic frame. The aesthetic sensibility and appreciation of detail found in Romanticism characterises the novel’s romantic focus on individual experience and interiority, while the novel’s formal structure and varied fictional and non-fictional content self-reflexively synthesise different discursive elements, rendering clear distinctions between form and content counterproductive. While aspects of *The English Patient* are based on historical record – “the discovery of the lost oasis of Zerzura in the Libyan desert and of the cave paintings in the Uweinat mountains, the mapping of the Libyan desert, his espionage work for Rommel, his book on desert exploration” (Bolland 52) – the “authoritative truth” (Bolland 66) of scientific, historical and geographical discourses are undermined by Ondaatje’s sensuous writing form. The author’s

words paradoxically establish their own “authoritative truth” as they resist one-dimensional readings, and valorise a form of sensitive close reading.

With connections between *The English Patient*’s form and content apparent amid the discontinuity dramatised in its narration and plot, widely dispersed fragments of story act as orienting nodes between different times, places and people. The novel’s “logic of imagery takes precedence over any strict adherence to the conventions of realism” (Scobie 94). Since Ondaatje makes meaning (through *content*) by way of the formal juxtaposition of words (subservient to *form*), Rosenfeld argues, “[d]arkness sets the scene from the start of Ondaatje’s novel... [A] concordance would almost certainly find “dark” the text’s most frequent word, with “light” a close second” (357).

The novel moves between scenes of “darkness” and “light”, obscurity and illumination as Ondaatje suggests that the world outside of the text is an opaque and fragmented place that can be better understood and contextualised by the novel. The reverse can also be said to be true: situated within the fictional domain, the novel’s fragments can only provide meaning if they reflect an intelligible reality. Similarly, notions of revelation as eschatological concept influences Ondaatje’s writing about real history, concerned with the study of things in their final stages before destruction. *The English Patient* presents revelation as a form of full disclosure, a final apocalyptic event bringing an end to civilisation and history, and ultimately a new beginning after destruction. The novel can consequently read as a *historiographical triptych* – a material unity where three parts coalesce to make meaning.

These three parts in *The English Patient* are individual sections dealing with the personal stories and histories of each main character; the excavation of historical people, events and records such as the English Patient, the Villa San Girolamo and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and the intertextual and supplementary evocation of apocryphal stories and mythical material. These elements provide continuity between different narratives, connecting self and other and linking the novel’s content and form to its reading practices.

In an interview with Catherine Bush, Ondaatje characterises reading “[a]s that great intimate act between reader and author, reader and book. It’s *sacred* to me, that relationship, and involves trust, surprise, and is ideally a *continuing* relationship” (Bush 239, my emphasis). Consequently, *The English Patient* presents the reading of bodies, landscapes, maps, books, sculpture and various explosive devices, analogous forms of text that enable the novel to stage how forms of *misreading* can be fatal – as in the case of Katherine and Lord Suffolk, who both die in the novel after attempting to impose their own rigid worldviews onto other bodies of text. As suggested by Rufus Cook, Kip’s knowledge of bombs and the English Patient’s knowledge of history, art and geography supplement the “gaps of plot” (7) in the



books that characters read: Their continuous epistemological relation becomes an alternative to the Patient's "inherently discontinuous" narrative (Cook 113).

The novel's aporetic cartography of reading and writing practices, emblematised by its criss-crossing between various stories, locations and characters, not only reflects but *performs* Ondaatje's views regarding authorship, where Penner argues, "the desire for erasure is present throughout the English Patient's narrative" (98). While examining the implications of the erasure of the Patient's identity in the novel, and connecting the novel's textual performance of erasure to notions of revelation, notions of reading and writing in *The English Patient* suggest more than the reading and writing of various texts, and self-reflexively dramatise the novel's reflective (meditative, connective) role as "a mirror walking down a road" (97). Through constant movement, fragmentation and discontinuity in terms of landscape, scene and focalisation, Ondaatje paradoxically yet consistently foregrounds intimate relationships in "a book about very tentative healing..." (Wachtel 252, 256)

*The English Patient* thus discloses an "emotional shift" in Ondaatje's work, "refusing the masculinist insistence on separateness as '[t]he four main characters' 'way of being connected' to each other forms the basis of the novel" (Ellis 25-26). Through a realisation of this shift towards a more "sociable" understanding of the self, this intersubjectivity extends to the larger, more abstract categories of community and nation. While war isolates characters, their shared trauma ironically creates the grounds for relation to others – demonstrated in the novel's forms of connection, familiarity, intimacy and knowledge. All of the English Patient, Caravaggio, Hana and Kip are hurt emotionally or physically during *The English Patient*. This demonstrates a tragic and ironic form of pain and suffering stemming from a unique personal strength rather than from a weakness. I argue that their suffering renders them saint-like figures connected rather than separated through their communal suffering. Since a form of relational living in the novel's fictional reality ties to the valorisation of the *civil* – the social, communal and universal – the novel dramatises its conception of relation as kinds of (af)filliative connections that link subjects and subject matter in the text, simultaneously establishing a relative impression of history, memory and individual story.

As a result, *The English Patient* argues for the close reading and (re)construction of individual stories in relation to others through intertextual and supplementary reflection. Ultimately, Ondaatje's novel shifts between three main environments – the Villa San Girolamo, the space of the desert and the garden space – in order to demonstrate communal understanding and ethical relations between characters. The plurality of experience, the embodied nature of reading and intimacy, and the opacity of consciousness in *The English Patient* can then show how Ondaatje's individual stories form part of a larger embodiment of

communal understanding, an intimate vision of a personal and humane politics of location and locatedness that performs an ultimately ethical relation to history and subjectivity<sup>1</sup>.

Fittingly, Ondaatje immediately invokes reading, relation and (re)construction by embedding his central characters in a former nunnery, the Villa San Girolamo. As a physical and spiritual refuge, the Villa not only houses textual fragments in its library but wounded bodies and minds in its various rooms, echoing a similar desert safe haven where “every animal that came within a certain radius of that house was given a welcome – the tame, the half born, the wild, the wounded” in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (36). Whereas *The English Patient* self-reflexively discloses “[p]erhaps this villa is a similar tableau... momentarily lit up...” (296), the intersection between the novel’s malleability and the Villa’s formal structure encompasses a heteroglot “novelistic” space encapsulating many voices and stories. In addition, the imaginative “middle ground” between the concreteness of the novel (book) and the descriptions of the Villa it holds speaks to a nomadic anomalism leaving readers like the Villa’s inhabitants “as if in a buried city” (232).

Ondaatje utilises the novel to gather indeterminate fragments to become more than the sum of its parts. By representing history as something tangible and material, with layer upon layer gradually shaping an ongoing palimpsest – a work of art or artefact where original inscriptions are overlaid with new markers while traces of the original are often still visible – the novel extends this notion to its representation of intertextuality and the reading and writing of texts, which I subsequently discuss.

Andrew Shin also recognises the Villa as a kind of palimpsest, arguing that “[t]he crumbling villa... becomes a palimpsest of human history, epitomizing modernity’s destructive power as well as Western culture’s redemptive potential, the fragments of civilisation that buttress the ruins of loss” (222). This structural and (re)constructive palimpsest juxtaposes humanity with history’s destructive character, while allowing forms of civilisation and culture to speak back to such “ruins of loss” through marginal voices. The correspondence between the novel and that of the Villa extends to the novel’s main character, the English Patient, who becomes its titular torchbearer of historiographical excavations. As remnants of war’s residual aftershock, both the Villa and the Patient survive *despite* their annihilation, while, from early on, Ondaatje connects literal and figurative notions of burning and revelation to embodied enlightenment. The Villa’s geography thus becomes “alive” with meaning in “moments of light” (296), its permeable barriers enabling the projection of personal wounds onto spaces, texts and onto the Patient, a point I revisit later in this chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> For an illuminating reading of the ways in which the novel’s “Acknowledgements” and main narratives are “clearly opposed in their treatments of history”, see Westerman, Molly. “Of skulls and Spirits”: The Haunting Space between Fictional(ised) History and historical Note in *CLIO* 35: 3 2006.

In a similar manner, just as the Villa brings characters together, the notion of intertextuality influences Ondaatje's narratives. Intertextuality allows authors to acknowledge other texts outside their own frame of reference, foregrounding a textual and material community of embodied ideas and authors in constant conversation rather than opposition. If we then follow Barthes in viewing "the text is a tissue of quotations" positioned in a textual "network" (S/Z 5), Ondaatje's historiography writes about history without privileging one set of texts, opinions or beliefs above any other, in effect making the appealing point that the body of history, much like our own lives, is bound and defined by relationships, not to mention multi-layered. Ondaatje's writing of and about history also speaks towards a form of writing that encompasses many different forms of revelation, a point I take up below.

Redolent of the intertextuality in Ondaatje's other novels, *The English Patient* uses different texts to enlarge its inter-textual network. While David Roxborough explores the novel's Biblical allusions, Bill Fledderus traces connections between the text and Grail legends, arguing that myth in the novel is "both modern in its attempt to reveal universal psychological truths and postmodern in its blurring and recreation of identity" (49) with a modern mythic intertext in T.S Eliot's *The Wasteland*. While I will not discuss this point in this dissertation, this reference to Eliot notably creates scope for references to his own concept of the "historical sense" in relation to the palimpsestic model of history presented when discussing the Villa as space, and to the final lines of *The Wasteland* in relation to the aforementioned quote by Shin on p. 27.

Jody Mason recognises how Hana's stepfather Patrick during *In the Skin of a Lion* moves in the "wilderness" of Toronto, as incarnation of the mythic Gilgamesh who mourns the loss of his companion, Enkidu. This connection relates to the way that "mythification" features in *The English Patient*. While I discuss the English Patient in detail below, it appears that Caravaggio, Patrick's close friend, roams like a bewildered animal towards Hana and the Villa. Described as "the animal out of the desert that stumble[s] back home" (ISL 205), Caravaggio is linked to the itinerant English Patient – akin to the mythic Gilgamesh wandering through the desert. This is a connection drawn by way of the painting "David with the Head of Goliath," one which I discuss below.

Descriptions of Caravaggio and the Patient as desert wanderers also invoke links between *The English Patient* and Homer's *The Odyssey*. Since critics have often teased out elaborate connections between the journeys and characterisations of the English Patient and Odysseus, alongside the kind of affinity *through* anonymity the two men share as "burnt man" and "Nobody", I do not discuss *The Odyssey* as mythical intertext here. Rather, I recognise Homer's work as another manifestation of Ondaatje's fascination with apocryphal stories, and note that the open-endedness of *The Odyssey* in turn foregrounds *The English Patient's* problematisation of discursive borders through a personified *authorial* wanderlust.

Given that Ondaatje's use of mythical material clearly enables connections between Ondaatje's *own* novels and various other texts, Joseph Pesch argues that the novel's mythical material satisfies "nostalgic longing for pre-apocalyptic stability" (Pesch 119). Conversely, the *non-mythical* intertexts in *The English Patient* disrupt a reading of the novel and its reading practices as much as they augment a sense of inter-relation. While John Bolland correctly notes the intertextual importance of *Kim*, texts such as the *Last of the Mohicans*, *The Charterhouse of Parma* and *Robinson Crusoe* are also explicitly referenced. Therefore, I duly note but will not discuss these intertexts here, except to state that the novel is located at the nexus of widely divergent textual influences and forms of embodied ideas, and that it appears to revel in its multiple levels of connection to other texts and genres<sup>2</sup>. The novel's intertextuality underscores how the novel and "real life" experience is arguably as itinerant as life itself, a fragmented and (dis)continuous process contained by its "novelistic" qualities.

In his later post-structuralist works, Barthes states that "[n]arrative begins with the very history of humanity; there is not, there never has been, any people anywhere without narrative" ("Semiotic" 95). Following Barthes, Schumacher states that "[r]eading the world constitutes a narrative act, a continual placing and displacing of signifiers... to gather experience into a coherent pattern"(cited in Ismail 2). This corporeal and intimate reading process in the novel, done in search of disclosure, wholeness, completion and stable sense of self, embodies the dissemination of meaning through the body itself, where readers literally become intimate with texts within "a work and a game" (Barthes "Rustle" 41). This leads Rosenfeld to rightly argue that "[t]here is no one way of reading [in the novel], nor is reading unidirectional. Spies espy spies. Love is described as a mutual act of reading, discernment. War is a process of two sides out-reading each other" (354-355). The Patient is a critical reader of various texts, landscapes, people and maps. As subaltern subject, Kip "did not yet have a faith in books" (111), while fascinated by art and sculpture. Caravaggio as thief reads different environments rather than books, while Hana is the novel's most conventional reader.

As bombs are simultaneously of the past and present through their unique potential to contain and warp time, *The English Patient* exposes how the "full disclosure" or detonation of specifically chosen bombs starkly contrasts unexpected explosions in neutral spaces. With the novel's many undetonated explosives emblematic of dangers in the reading practices of European high culture, those that view themselves as expert readers – the English Patient and Lord Suffolk in particular – pay a high price for their misreading, losing their lives in a painful, violent manner. It would appear that misreading in the novel is both prevalent and inevitable. Correspondingly, the novel's exploration of *misreading* exposes the dangerous, uncertain correspondence between bombs and texts through various stories. While saving Hana from misreading Kipling, the Patient cannot avoid the misreading of his own relationship with Katherine and Geoffrey Clifton. He fails to see the smoke signals of his

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<sup>2</sup> For discussions of *Kim* as intertext, see Bolland, Ismail and Jacobs.

incompatibility with Katherine, which ultimately leads to his burning fall from the sky. The novel suggests that Caravaggio reads the Patient's incarnation before his accident (as the Count Almasy) correctly, initially only super-imposing his own idea of the burnt man onto his view of Almasy, but without acknowledging the complexities of his guise as burnt Patient.

Tragic misreading is also present in the novel through its characterisation of Hana and Kip. Hana as nurse is determined, for better or worse, to remain true to the Patient because of her inability to let go of the guilt she feels about her stepfather Patrick's death. While Kip eventually saves Hana from the explosion of bombs, he steadfastly projects the roles of fatherhood onto those he views as colonial representatives, unable to see how race influences his interactions with Lord Suffolk and the Patient, with whom he discusses explosives and artillery. These misreadings dramatise how bombs detonate in fiction and reality, emphasising the hazardous nature of interpersonal relations, a point I flesh out below.

Corey Lavender connects reading in the novel to the explosive nature of books (127-130), where books and bombs are analogous at various intersections, most clearly demonstrated through characterisations of Kip, his mentor Lord Suffolk and the English Patient. Enveloping and insidious references to bombs are made at various points in the narrative, relating to bombs in the Villa (23), the bombs Kip defuses in the Villa's library and "sees everywhere" (87, 88), and the regional differences in the manufacturing of explosive devices (100). Ondaatje also writes about the bomb Kip defuses with Hana's help close to the Villa in a nearby field (110-114), and the "unimaginable scale" of explosives made from all kinds of different materials in Italy and North Africa (285), not to mention nerve-shredding accounts of Kip's defusing of the Erith bomb (201-206) and Esau bomb (221-227). This explosive fusion of bombs, bodies and texts leads Alice Brittan to relate reading to the "cryptographic challenges of decipherment or decoding that led to the deployment of soldiers, the bombing of boats, the capture of spies, and the protection or endangerment of citizens" (211).

Consequently, as self-reflexive history dealing with an arsenal of explosives, *The English Patient* – mainly through Kip's character – gestures towards texts such as Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* and *The Secret Agent*. When viewed in tandem, these works can be seen to reflect the first fictional accounts of suicide bombings, explosives and terror attacks. Conrad's novels offer an emblematically "modern" form of embodied politics, in a world divided recognisably into the West and non-West, geopolitical distinctions that continue to determine international and in some cases interpersonal relations today. As "the novel works within the protocols of the literature only to violently dismantle them" (Ismail 413), its *seventh* chapter exposes its novel's most perspicuous reading lesson. Ondaatje forges a sympathetic subject in Kip's mentor Lord Suffolk, an "autodidact" who believes "his mind could read the motives and spirit behind any invention" (198). Suffolk is unsurprisingly a literary literalist: "Until war broke out his passion was the study of Lorna Doone and how

authentic the novel was historically and geographically” (185). Since Suffolk dies after misreading a bomb, Ondaatje’s fusion of reading with explosives, and critique of canonical reading practices defy misreading. By symbolically charging the connective wires of a new reading practice after Suffolk’s death, Kip realises that he is “capable of having wires attached to him”(197), and he subsequently carries the yoke of a “map of responsibility” (208) that exposes the violence that pre-determined readings transpose onto elusive texts.

As stated previously, *The English Patient* is a novel concerned with *reading practices*, one where maps play a central role. Since references to maps include “the great maps of art” (70), “various maps of fate” (272), and “mapped... sadness” (270), the text’s performance of cartography *embodies* the novel’s grandiose melancholia. With its titular character reading and mapping the outside world, cartography connects (to) relations of power, dominance and control, as explorers and mapmakers read spaces while leaving behind bereft geographies and wounded subjects. The critic Rufus Cook recognises the “need to map... and identify some ‘original pattern’ (193) underlying ‘the external world of accident and succession” (Cook 35). While Ondaatje’s inclusion of various art forms like maps helps characters to “map” their environment, identities, and their relationships with others (Cook, 36), it is the ‘great maps of art’ (70) that provide the means to (re)construct individual stories and re-connect with others. As cartography – trans-national, political and personal – connects to a search for meaning, Ahmad Abu Baker and Marlene Goldman have undertaken studies of maps and their significance in the novel. In this section, I link their observations to one of my central arguments in this chapter – that Ondaatje includes various marginal experiences and voices in order to *narrativise* a re-writing of history, demonstrate how the close reading of bodies of text is analogous to the intimate reading of the other as a corporeal text.

Within the (im)printed pages of *The English Patient*, maps function as “visual analogues for colonialism and its imposition of fixed meaning on territory” (Huggan cited in Bolland, 46). Similarly, Abu Baker relates cartography to power relations (98, 104) where maps reduce various landscapes to a “skeletal structure” (*EP* 23). This relates to Foucault’s contention in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: “[P]ower and knowledge directly imply one another... there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (Foucault 27). Upon his inflamed fall from the desert sky, the Bedouin tribe effortlessly read the body of the burnt, anonymous Patient. By subsequently making sense of his burns and treating them accordingly, they are in turn able to request that he “read” and impart to them his immense knowledge of armaments that are classified according to their destructive potential, in a manner analogous to the ways in which bombs are classified later in the text.

Intimately aware of the classificatory function of discourse and with “information like a sea in him” (18), the English Patient’s knowledge is a “reservoir of information... passed like a counter of usefulness from tribe to tribe” (23, 95). His knowledge of both nature and culture renders him extremely useful to the desert tribes, but as a ticking time bomb threatening the Allied Forces. By exposing the attempts by explorers to map the desert, “where nothing was strapped down or permanent” (*EP*22), Ondaatje uncovers the ill-fated impulse to define *borderless* and *impermanent* spaces like the desert, a space I discuss in more detail below. For explorers like Fenelon-Barnes, cartography and naming relate closely in the quest to achieve a sense of dominance and mastery over the desert, in their eyes most possible through the gateway of language, frame and regulating desert “ownership” through maps and naming:

[S]ome wanted their *mark* there... Fenelon-Barnes wanted the *fossil trees* he discovered to bear *his name*. He even wanted a *tribe* to take his name, and spent a *year* in the negotiations. Then *Bauchan* outdid him, having a type of *sand dune* named after him. (139, my emphasis)

This passage reveals how mapping works through a process of naming. As a system of marking that articulates instances of *marked difference*, mapping impresses upon us just how short-sighted attempts to map the ephemeral and ethereal – by believing that it is possible to capture and control the sands of time – can be. The inherent properties of “fossil trees” and the customs of Bedouin tribes cannot be mapped and traced, only *effaced*. Similarly, because natural and cultural properties will arguably remain foreign to narcissistic cartographers that attempt to leave their footprints in the sand, it is both a poisonous and fruitless endeavour, and a particularly conceited (colonial) exercise to name a type of sand dune after yourself.

Conversely, Kip’s desire to understand cartography involves both the Patient and Lord Suffolk, men with *contrasting* approaches to the world of maps and mapping of the world. Whereas Suffolk reads cartography’s ability to (un)cover geographical spaces and impose discursive boundaries, the Patient reads the potential of maps to signify dominance and conquest. Instead of mapping out a literal truth, the English Patient unsettles cartography’s boundaries by challenging conventional ways of looking, Ondaatje suggesting that mapmakers have a false mastery akin to a morphine rush after being wounded. Conversely, maps can also act as connective tools, with the “capacity to implode time and geography the common denominator linking map-making to the discourses of art and religion” (Goldman 912).

In a telling example of such chronological and geographical “implosion,” the narrator explains how twentieth-century soldiers “came upon their contemporary faces” in “the Piero Della Francesca frescoes of the Queen of Sheba, King Solomon, and Adam” (70). Likewise, Ondaatje writes about history from various vantage points, with characters acting as fragments of a larger, three-dimensional whole: “Surrounded by trompe l’oeil walls and half

broken statues, [characters] feel like figures on a fresco” (Rosenfeld 358). I discuss the ultimate significance of trompe l’oeil in the section of my argument dealing with the novel’s treatment of conceptions of relation, placed just before my conclusion.

Because cartography is a way of *looking* at the world and a way to *name* it, Ondaatje supplements his excavations of historical subjects and stories with powerful portrayals of the *individual gaze*, linked to the *cartographical gazes* captured in the novel. Bolland states that

[i]n his early works, Ondaatje tends to establish the violent energy of his heroes through the portrayal of women as passive victims of masculine power. In *The English Patient*, too, the intensity of Almasi’s relationship with Katherine is first shown through an image of violence to the female body, and there are other such disturbing images, of women tethered their men by a leash around the little finger, of the small Arab girl tied up in Fenelon Barnes’s bed. (43)

Since this is only a fragment of the entire novel, Bolland also argues that persuasive evidence suggests a rethinking of such violent aesthetics, a reading I endorse in this dissertation. In order to suggest such a re-thinking, Ondaatje connects the individual gaze and the novel’s gender politics in his metafictional history. Thus, Shin contends that “*The English Patient* suggests that history belongs to those who possess the gaze; on the other hand, the novel also suggests that the version of history is persistently destabilised by the aesthetics of the look...” (227). For Katherine’s husband Geoffrey and the English Patient, looking connects to forms of inspection and a sense of ownership over female bodies: “[Clifton] celebrated the beauty of her arms, the thin line of her ankles” (230). The Patient confers Biblical resonance on his first gaze upon Katherine, “I see her still, always, with the eye of Adam” (144). By recognising with “the eye of Adam” that Katherine “wore an *unconquerable* face” (154, my emphasis), the English Patient recognises how Katherine’s face cannot be claimed or owned by any man, and that his attempts at appropriating Katherine as his own could be fatal.

By envisaging how distance from intimacy provides clarity that lovers are unable to purchase, the Patient states that “[s]he was studying me. Such a simple thing. And I was watching for one wrong move in her statue-like gaze, something that would give her away” (154). With a concession that his own form of looking at Katherine was both misguided and elementary, the Patient is able to see how his male gaze sought less to validate her views of him and the world, but rather to latch onto the moment when she would be betrayed by her “statue-like gaze”, when her rigid and unyielding “effigy” (89) of control and command would dissolve. This revelation links Katherine to Kip and to his time spent with sculptures and the statue of the Virgin Mary before the atomic bombings at the novel’s end (282-83), a matter I discuss in relation to the novel’s characterisation of Kip. Because *viewing* relations between Katherine and these male figures rely upon *male* authority, this incident is a reversal of what happens



earlier in the novel, when Caravaggio “turns and sees Hana asleep on the sofa... He sneezed out loud, and... She was awake, the eyes staring ahead of him” (81)

While “staring ahead” at other forms of reflection, ownership or appropriation, the novel presents *naming* as the third element of Ondaatje’s *historiographical triptych* along with cartography and the individual gaze, consistently excavating reflections between the domains of fiction and real life. Naming in *The English Patient* is important in the novel’s demonstration of (re)construction, reading and relation, just like mapping and the individual gaze are complex keys to the close reading of character and identity. By connecting cartography to the performance of giving title, naming signifies the desire to identify but also (de)limit meaning. Having “stepped away from the war” (52), Hana refuses to leave the Villa without the Patient. David Caravaggio is similarly displaced, a Canadian with Italian (af)iliations that complicate his sense of identity, with Kip dislocated from his native India. With the continuously dis-located “English” Patient’s genealogy taken to be English on the account of his educational background, he is eventually identified as Hungarian Count Almásy. Correspondingly, the novel’s pervasive sense of displaced identity is not limited to the Villa’s inhabitants, but includes the characters of Geoffrey Clifton and Bagnold, who pretend to be civilian explorers but carry out surveillance for the British government.

Jeanne Delbaere argues that the English Patient is the “epitome of selflessness” (46), although the title of “Patient” makes him anonymous and conspicuously ordinary, again likely to be *misidentified*. The novel suggests that naming alone cannot express his identity, just as others can only be named in conversation and relation to others, an idea more conclusively dealt with when I discuss *Divisadero*. As “some kind of loose star on the edge of their system,” Kip forges allegiances with British figures such as Lord Suffolk, Miss Morden and the Patient (75), staying true to his religious and cultural affiliations. While Caravaggio suffers torture at the hands of one Rannuccio Tomassoni, his refusal to engage in a form of confidential revelation costs him both his dignity and his thumbs, Ondaatje thus suggesting that *separation* wounds him, just like the Patient, whom he views as his nemesis. In both cases, “separation” is not only suggested as a kind of distance from others, but as a kind of distance from and refusal to confess. The “confidentiality” of Caravaggio’s story and acts of espionage (taking place in secret of course) is largely eroded in his torture, and his interrogation could be an occasion for willing communication only up to the point that extreme violence and its capacity to annihilate language is excluded.

Ondaatje slyly places characters like Caravaggio, Geoffrey Clifton and Bagnold – tied to state machinery of espionage and war – in an Egyptian and North-African context. As elusive imperial agents already dislocated from familiar political contexts, those like Caravaggio “[are] trained to invent double agents or phantoms who would take on flesh. He had been in charge of a mythical agent named “Cheese,” and he spent weeks clothing him with facts,

[with] qualities of character...” (117). By entering the realm of the mythical yet allowing characters to clothe their self-conceptions with facts, naming draws various subjects into an excess of signification. This involves both the attempt to wrest certainty, order and control, and the necessary relation between individuals through ongoing differentiation and recognition.

Caravaggio is known only as “the man with the bandaged hands” before contacting Hana (27) and viewed as “the thief” throughout, only referred to as “Caravaggio” when close to Hana. With Hana “half adult and half child” (14), she “abandons the intimacy of names as she begins to call everyone “Buddy”, acknowledging the “relational imperative” of naming (Ellis 28). Consequently, while mostly referred to as “the nurse” or “the girl”, Hana is recognised by her own name in relation to others. Similarly, both sappers Kip and Hardy initially remain anonymous as “two men” (28) watching Hana play the piano. In the early stages of Kip’s residence he is yet to establish close relations, and is referred to as “the young sapper” (70, 71, 77, 79) or “the Sikh” (71, 72, 78). Akin to the Patient who also has two identities and two given names – “the English Patient” and “Almasy”; “Kip” and “Kirpal Singh” – while referred to otherwise – “the burnt man”, and “the boy” or “the sapper” – these men are only recognised by their familial names after establishing relations: The Patient becomes “the Patient”, while Kip is referred to as “Kirpal Singh”. A sense of relation in naming through a process of differentiation *and* recognition is thus essential for characters residing in the Villa. The opposite refusal to be named, or insistence to be called by a particular name, are invoked not only by Kip, but ironically also by the Patient. When the dying Katherine heeds the Patient in The Cave of Swimmers to “[k]iss me and call me by my name” (173), the cost of his wilful failing to adopt “correct” names is most clear when the Patient subsequently *fails* to unite them under the banner of the “right” name of Clifton. This results in his incarceration, leaving her to die in the desert when unable to return in time.

As I note previously, Ondaatje’s writings perform a corporeal intimacy representative of relationships between various texts and between various characters. In this section, I proceed to argue that the novel’s evocation of the body acts as the link binding these forms of intimacy. With the novel’s assertion that there is “no defence but to look for the truth in others” (117), just as I argue for a relational close reading of the novel’s demonstration of cartography, the gaze, the novel’s gender politics and naming, I now explore the intimate corporeality and textuality of Ondaatje’s bodies. Because the body can be mapped, viewed and named as text through “very different forms of semiotic exchange” (Bolland 38): photographed, archived, listed, coloured, scarred, wounded, loved, nurtured, continually present and absent, this allows us to read Ondaatje as a writer of embodiment that draw heavily on the writings of another widely recognised historiographer, Michel Foucault.

*The English Patient* presents a view of the body's close relation to history through notions of inscription, and the palimpsestic overlaying of history onto the body. Analogous to the process of mapping, the gaze, gender politics and naming are communal in nature and contingent on power relations between bodies – be it human bodies, landscapes, bodies of text or bodies of artwork – these connections are implicit in Foucault's assertion in *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison* that the body is “directly involved in a political field; power relationships have an immediate hold on it; they invest it, train it, mark it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (Foucault, 173). Kip's description of soldiers' initiation process in British colonial India elucidates the body's omnipresent political status (*EP* 170), where, through a literal whitewashing of identity, docile bodies become dependent on the markers of foreign and domestic power relations while simultaneously negated as autonomous subjects.

Although a striking scene in Anil's *Ghost* finds Sarath drawing an outline of a near-nude Anil as a part of their investigation into state-sponsored murders in the Sri Lankan civil War, the literal drawing on bodies with chalk in *The English Patient* more pertinently recalls a particular scene in the politically-charged *In the Skin of a Lion*, where Hazen Lewis literally outlines the body of his son Patrick: “In the drive-shed Hazen Lewis outlined the boy's body onto the plank walls with green chalk... [T]he lit fuse smoulders up and blows out a section of plank where the bed has been” (*ISL* 15). While Patrick's body allows for freedom of movement that is unconstrained by state authority, docile colonised bodies such as Kip's are the result of compliance with those in positions of power. As opposed to the ways in which *ISL* resists forms of hegemonic or dominant (ethnic or national) identity through an inclusion of characters from various nationalities, Ondaatje in *The English Patient* focuses specifically on the story and othered body of Kip to present a detailed account of colonial identification, projection and “lactification” or “whitening” of the Asian other, and the resistance that accompanies colonial practices.

At the same time as the body is a site of power relations – where bodily activity lays the platform for forms of inscription – one can also read the body as site of resistance, a site refusing containment or classification. Since I explore this point further when discussing the novel's characterisation of the English Patient and Kip, I only seek to draw attention to the fact that both the state and individuals inscribe the individual properties of the body during the course of *The English Patient*. Where one form of inscription signifies demarcation and control through surveillance, the inter-subjective inscription by lovers and friends *supplements* the body; as subjects inscribe their lives and identities (their own and others), the body is both the means and end of material presence. Because considerate, intimate writing on the body contrasts cartographical inscription of geographical bodies, Ondaatje posits the human body as a symbiotic, symbolic space between fiction and reality, an aperture potentially and productively *remade* into artworks, dreams, myths and legends.

After discussing the central location of the Villa as the material ground enabling connections across space and time, and discussing how cartography, the gaze and naming play a central role in the novel's narrative economy, I have noted how the body is the means and end to travel, literally and figuratively, towards new locations of understanding and intimacy. I now trace the novel's view of the desert and garden as such centrally (dis)connective locations. Ondaatje's words demonstrate that we can best understand our interconnectedness as humans through the spaces where we encounter each other, and where we face what lies beyond us.

Mason locates the desert as "geographic location of nomadism in the novel" (18). Consequently, I contend that the desert acts as fragmenting metaphor for both an isolated and secluded existence in the novel, disturbing and destabilising any attempts at (self)control. With all of the novel's characters nomadic in a sense, the Patient is never immersed or connected to a single space despite being bed-ridden, Hana is displaced from Canada and sleeps in different rooms of the Villa, Caravaggio as thief and spy is constantly in flux just like his sense of identity, and Kip is removed from his home in India. The nomadism of characters thus connects to the nature of *books* as itinerant, *wandering* between different spaces and forms of expression. As a place that "could not be claimed or owned" (138), the desert, like the Villa, is a location of "propinquity" (160), a space of potential nearness and close relation that can be seen as both remote and collective depending on circumstances.

Nomadism and war become aligned in the novel through the shared space of the desert, and by way of Ondaatje's subtle critique of forms of behavior that wilfully destroy rather than foster a sense of community. Although the novel notes the "silence" and "averting of eyes" from "425 B.C. to the beginning of the twentieth century" – emblematic of the "little interest" shown towards the desert for "hundreds of years" – it also takes account of the nineteenth century "river seekers" and various desert explorations that took place in 1920s and 1930s, before and after World War One (160). Not only is the desert – as opposed to the relative stillness and serenity of garden spaces in the novel – described as a "battlefield" joining various epistemological and ontological "tribes" (24), but distinguished as an opaque place joining various role-players in a "theatre of war" (143), a "place of pockets. The trompe l'oeil of time and water" (275).

With the Patient and his team of explorers from the Royal Cartographic Society immersed in such a mercurial and timeless location during World War Two, they search for the *mythical* oasis Zerzura, or the city of Acacias it is also known (142-143). "Surrounded" by "lost history" in the desert, the Patient admits to the Villa's inhabitants that it seemed as if "[t]he world ended out there" (144). As an example of such a *personal* revelation or ending, those that enter the desert as "teams" (178), under the "thin edge of a cult" (245) can be "lost forever" (146), with the desert a "piece of cloth carried by winds" (147). In the desert, the

Patient carries with him Herodotus' *Histories*, while "Madox – a saint in his own marriage – carried Anna Karenina, continually rereading the story of romance and deceit" (252).

Since Madox is "a man who died because of nations" (242), the Patient continues to "map" how Madox killed himself with his pistol during a church ceremony, convinced that the British Empire had lost its moral compass: "Madox [...] pulled out the desert pistol, bent over and shot himself in the heart. He was dead immediately" (257). Metaphorically "shot in the heart" by the fatal "drug" of violent colonial inscription, The English Patient's fellow explorer and best friend is unable to reconcile his own role as cartographer with the role of Empire. The Patient notes how Madox died immediately, whereas the novel as a whole provides a spectral, ethereal account of history's inheritance of loss, with repeated mention of ghosts that linger. These "supernatural" narrative fragments appear in Caravaggio's description of the *Patient* as "ghost" (56), a reference to the Patient as *Hana's* ghost (39), and *Kip's* apparent re-appearance in the Patient's room after leaving the Villa (308), functioning to supplement the novel's vision of history as palimpsestic and spectral and serving as another example of Ondaatje's penchant for haunting motifs of bereavement, loss and death.

As opposed to the nomadism, remoteness and collective isolation embodied in the desert space, the garden space is arguably "a place of earthy rootedness and connectivity that finally has as much claim on the [imagination] as does the clean and empty canvas of the desert" (Friedman 70). To "[erase] the thunder" of their traumatic pasts (25), one could say that all the Villa's inhabitants share traumatic displacement, foregrounded symbolically through the "damp fires" and "plant-odoured smoke" surrounding the Villa's garden every day during bonfires that attempt to dry the "permanently wet and shadowed upper garden" (131). To the West, "[t]here are two levels of long, narrow garden", with the first being a "formal terrace", and the higher level a "darker garden where stone steps and concrete statues almost disappear under the green mildew of the rains" (131), where Kip decides to pitch his tent.

In an "apocryphal story" that refuses classification along only "two levels", fragments of human suffering gradually gather to form a quilted constellation representative of a shared and symbolic "missing heart" (165). This is none more evident than with Ondaatje's characterisation of the English Patient, one with the least "green" self that nonetheless brings characters together. Just as the English Patient advises Hana what to find and grow, with "plum leaves", "red savory", "hazel and chokecherries" at the top of his list, the Villa's garden eventually becomes "Hana's garden" (213), with the Patient helping her to plant seeds of a future beyond a "drift of voices" (131).

Not only is the English Patient's room a kind of sanctuary, a "painted arbour" and "arbourbed bedroom" (3,144), but the Patient has a *favourite* garden located in Kew (9). When not spending time in the desert with fellow explorer Madox in the desert or conducting research

with his colleague Bermann in Arab libraries, he “meets [Katherine] in [Cairo’s] Groppi Park (163). The Patient described her as “a woman who misses moisture, who has always loved low green hedges and ferns. While this much greenery feels like a carnival” (163,). This passage foreshadows the fracture of a violently intimate close relationship that for all purposes is already in the *past*, and provides a great contrast between the Patient’s distaste for the “greenery” of gardens and his annihilation by fire, which ironically results in his arboreal asylum at the Villa, surrounded by a trellis of *trompe l’oeil*. The English Patient’s memories of Katherine disclose how “[w]hen she couldn’t sleep she drew her *mother’s* garden for me... She would take my wrist at the confluence of veins and guide it onto the hollow indentation at her neck” (171-172). This passage not only draws attention to the fact that the bed-ridden Patient’s knowledge of gardens is embedded within him after his relationship with Katherine but, more significantly, it elucidates how the novel as a whole cultivates a distinctly earthy and intimate form of writing where landscapes and human bodies are made equivalent.

Claudia Benthien argues that the novel, through characterisations of the Patient as “bogeyman of history” (96), foregrounds “an ecstatic experience with nature”, presenting archetypal forms in “the tree, the river, and the cave” (214) that nevertheless cannot be reduced to forms of discursive practise. In a similar manner, while Katherine is “the woman *translated* into leaves” (175, my emphasis) after her death, the Patient’s burnt body literally erases the narrative markers between the individual story and collective history, where we deal with decidedly active “notions of merging, of receiving into oneself, of plunging into, and of sheltering oneself in somebody else” (Benthien 214).

In her article “Textual Hauntings”: Narrating History, Memory and Silence in *The English Patient*, Amy Novak argues that the novel “reveals the impossibility of articulating the spectre of a traumatic past... within the space of the knowable” (215). With the English Patient and his story in need of consistent resuscitation despite the “impossibility” of complete “articulation”, and as his “anonymity” is the novel’s central conundrum, he is the glue that binds the novel’s main characters, a skin that requires new ways of narrative archaeology that move beyond “the knowable”<sup>3</sup>. With his body an “ebony pool” (59) in contrast to the dark brown body of Kip, Stephen Totosy de Zepetnek recognises the novel’s intentional blurring between history and story, fact and fiction, arguing that “Almasy’s identity is also elusive in historical sources: “[W]ho was this count Almasy?” writes Buckheit, the historian” (145). Whereas creativity wounds those like real life jazz musician Charles “Buddy” Bolden and Caravaggio in *Coming Through Slaughter* and *In the Skin of a Lion*, *The*

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<sup>3</sup> This dissertation refers to the novel’s protagonist and titular character as the Patient rather than Almasy to reserve the sense of ambiguity and indeterminacy that surrounds his identity, while simultaneously acknowledging the ironic foreclosure this could be read to suggest.

*English Patient's* delves under the "skin" of personal and political ruin to present the explorer's annihilation while living out his creative vision of the world.

Whereas Bolden's work was never recorded and his life story left "a desert of facts"(134), the *Patient* is a further example of Sam Solecki's conception of the "extremist artists" creating "an aesthetic artefact directly, recklessly, even violently out of [their] own experiences" (247). Solecki's comment ties to my exploration of the way different characters play the role of the author-figure. During the course of *The English Patient*, the explorer and cartographer is referred to as a "ghost" (50), "ebony pool" (50) and an "effigy" (161), suggesting that he is a figure(head) blurring boundaries between source and supplement, fiction and reality, echoing Ondaatje's tribute to marginal figures in *White Dwarfs*:

[T]his is for those people

that hover and hover

and die in the ether peripheries

(*Cinnamon Peeler* 47).

Ondaatje makes a real historical figure the textual and thematic axis of his fictional novel and ode to the forgotten men and women of history. Since the "true" identity of this man remains opaque and fragmentary throughout, the Patient's "identarian suicide" (Totosy de Zepetnek 139) as one that "hover[s] and hover[s]" and "dies" in the "ether peripheries" leaves him like a literal and mythical phoenix. He is an "unreadable enigma" (Penner 78), experiencing both the loss of close connection with an intimate lover and an all-encompassing loss of bodily sensations. Similarly, when Katherine's body is pulled from the wreckage of the burnt plane after their crash, "[t]here didn't seem to be a mark on her" (257), with all of her injuries suggested to be internal, not to mention suggestive of psychological trauma. While I do not wish to recapitulate Penner's arguments regarding the Patient's complex problematisation of Foucault's Author-Function (which, amongst other things, demands the naming of the writer to understand the work in question), I feel it is useful to point out that the Patient's unreadability and anonymity after his plane crash in the desert translates into a broadening of discursive boundaries around his story. This helps us to frame and make sense of the Patient's identity, and to "read" his diary captured in Herodotus' *Histories*. Regarding the role of the English Patient in the novel, Ellis contends,

[i]f the English Patient represents the formerly valorised, insistently idealised Ondaatje hero, then perhaps his charred and blackened body as he lies drugged and sinking into death, without identity, can be seen as Ondaatje's recognition of the failure of that particular form of literary hero and the version

of masculinity he embodies. Violent, individualistic masculinity based on isolation and separation, has, quite literally, burned itself out for Ondaatje... (26)

The novel recognises the Patient as someone who reads various landscapes, texts and the body of Katherine Clifton. Subsequently, as both reader and author-figure, the “re-writing” of his story enables the novel to explore the interconnection of various other apocryphal stories (fictional, mythical, intertextual, and historical). Cook explains that by exploding “time-defeating” narrative modes, the Patient escapes “constrictions of a phenomenal existence, free to immerse himself in the temporal, archetypal world of Homer, Herodotus and Kipling, and in the non-sequential, ceremonial time of Bedouin ritual and myth” (48). Consequently, his desire “to walk upon such an earth that had no maps” (261) echoes the sentiments in *Handwriting*, where the speaker desires to “roam restless, searching for the thin border of the fence to break through or leap. Leaping and bowing” (74-75). While the Patient desires to “[e]rase the family name! Erase nations!” (138-9),

[n]ationalism is implicated in (characters’) suffering in [many] ways: they are victims of a war pursued for nationalistic ends; their complex heritage causes problems of identification and allegiance; their stories are linked by theme of betrayal, which exemplifies the conflict between personal commitment to individual or group and the more abstract allegiance to nationhood or state. (Bolland 30)

By meditating on the meaning of *desertion*, the text embodies a geographical restless by moving between the locations of the Villa, the garden and the desert itself, among others. Similarly, the Patient’s story takes different vantage points depending on the listener’s identity. Even as the novel provides textual evidence that the Patient could well be the count Ladislaus de Almásy based on assertions by Caravaggio, the Patient refers to himself in the first and third person. Hana wants to delimit the Patient’s identity to a clear-cut sense of Englishness, while Kip desperately needs the Patient to be English to project his need for colonial acceptance and a father figure. An emerging symmetry appears as the Patient’s story *gradually* relates to Caravaggio’s similarly traumatic life-story and sense of dislocation.

With the Patient thus *not* English, the novel’s title allows for multiple readings, suggestive of indeterminacy and open-endedness characteristic of the entire novel. The *Patient’s* indeterminate identity foregrounds the novel’s overall blurring of boundaries between concepts, themes, stories and characters, allowing the novel to re-write history from marginal perspectives. From the novel’s very first description of the Patient “dragging the listening heart of the young nurse with him to wherever his mind is” (4), this mirrors the individual readers’ patient (re)reading of *The English Patient*, while reinforcing how intimate relations between characters and stories reflect the corporeal relationship between reader and book.



A wealth of personal history, knowledge and stories are stored amid the “ruins” and “rooms” of the Patient’s memory, much like the material presence of knowledge in the books that survive in the Villa’s library. By reviving various storytelling strands, the Patient’s memorial excavations “slip from level to level like a hawk” (4), and his opportunity to tell a story ultimately rests on an analogous relation between the concepts of love and loss and their strange beauty in the novel. As the main vehicle of narration, the *Patient’s* fragmented storytelling reflects the episodic, impressionistic character of much of the novel. This is the case even as his omni-present morphine injections further emphasise novel’s thanatoid themes (related to loss, dreams, death, darkness). With the Patient embodying a distinctly earthy and esoteric form of supplementation and intertextuality, he finds a kindred spirit in Herodotus’ *Histories*, with whom he shares a fascination with history, narrative and political relations:

[W]ritten in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E...its account of the wars between Greece and Persia essentially creates and informs the entire geo-political and cultural traditions of an “East” and a “West”, of Orientalism and Occidentalism, and the struggles of nations and empires. (O’Dea 5)

What the Patient sees in *The Histories* of Herodotus is akin to a reflection of his own life-story and work: “What you find in him are cul-de-sacs within the sweep of history – how people betray each other for the sake of nations, how people fall in love” (118-119). The Patient’s palimpsestic historical book, one that captures “betrayal” and “love” in equal measure, is an example of what Barthes terms a *writerly text*, not given to finality or interpretative closure. As Barthes states: “The writerly text is a perpetual present, upon which no *consequent* language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped...” (S/Z 5). As *writerly texts* contrast *readerly texts* (S/Z 5), Ondaatje’s novel and the Patient’s book are writerly texts insofar as they self-consciously reflect (on) their own artifice. By literarily displacing the author’s privileged position, the gesture recalls Patrick’s *In the Skin of a Lion*, where “[a]ll these gestures removed place, country, everything” (ISL 72). As the Patient actively superimposes superordinate ideas onto *The Histories*, he fulfils Barthes’ desire, where “the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (S/Z 4). Jacques Derrida in *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences* foregrounds this intertextual notion of supplementation, describing the supplement as

that which exceeds signification, but which grounds and disrupts the play of meaning. Without a stable referent to close down the play of meaning, the excess of the signifier creates an endless exchange of signs in the struggle towards signification. (300)

The Derridean supplement relates paradoxically to its “original”, suggesting a beginning and an end, a totality and a deficiency, performing Derrida’s original phrasing that “[o]ne wishes to go back from the supplement to the source: one must recognise that there is a supplement at the source” (304). Foucault makes a comparable contention in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, noting how the “frontiers of a book are never clear-cut... it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network” (23). This idea of writing as an intertextual, supplementary, and gradual process with unclear “frontiers” applies to the body and body of writing of the English Patient. His anonymous writings into *The Histories* avoid straightforward classification, duplicating what is *already* supplementary in the nomenclature of historical writing: “This history of mine,” Herodotus says, “has from the *beginning* sought out the *supplementary* to the *main argument*” (EP 119, my emphasis).

Redolent of the manner in which Ondaatje overlays various histories in his personal narrative craft, the *Patient’s* entire individualised book is a palimpsest, where, like the plot of *The English Patient*, the Patient’s book literally thickens in the reading and writing process. Immortalised onto the text’s original pages are, apart from the aforementioned elements, various diary entries and journal notes, alongside a desert exploration article, literary fragments, many individual maps, jazz lyrics, a Stephen Crane poem, and basic reproductions of art. Herodotus is the Patient’s “only connection with the world of cities”, *The Histories* his “commonplace book” of “supposed” “ancient [and] modern lies” (261). When uncovering “the truth to what had seemed a lie”, the Patient covers these writings with maps, news clippings or sketches (261). A leaf from the Bible is extracted and glued into *The Histories* (94-95), while the novel also quotes from the Bible on occasion (308, 312, 313). Herodotus’ history therefore becomes “super-textual” (Dawson 62) in its dismissal of alternative views, enacting the textual capacity for violence alluded to in the supplement’s “evil eye” (Derrida 146). This textual presence “takes-the-place” of the lack at the text’s core (146), showing how necessarily material texts are dangerous when read without context or perspective.

By breaking from the “tyranny of chronology” in conventional historiography (Adhikari 53), Ondaatje demonstrates the inter-subjective connections between various lives and stories, moving between various times and places to do so. To supplement the novel’s main narratives, Ondaatje presents strands of various other stories – with details of the violent extra-marital relations between the Patient and Katherine Clifton, his capture by Allied forces and her death in The Cave of Swimmers, alongside his rescue by the Bedouins, all within the context of the Second World War. In these fragmented (re)constructions, we hear about the Patient’s upbringing and his close friend Madox’s suicide; Kip’s family and brother in India and his own incorporation into the colonial network; and hear about Hana’s youth in Toronto, while non-sequential recollections of torture by the Gestapo shade Caravaggio’s dark past as womaniser and thief eventually marrying his wife Gianetta.

As *The English Patient*'s complex narrative network thus rests on the material presence of other texts, the text performs characters reading other stories that influence their own character and fate. By bringing together subjective experience with fictional representation, allusions to texts such as the Bible, *Paradise Lost* and *The Histories* show the past and present in constant conversation through reading as storytelling. Despite the fact that Hana reads aloud to the Patient from nineteenth-century novels, the Patient recounts Katherine's story of Candaules and Gyges from *The Histories*, while Patrick's story is told by Caravaggio to Hana – bringing both *The English Patient* and *In the Skin of a Lion*'s intertextual, fluid and boundary-crossing storytelling full circle. Through intimate storytelling, the contrasts in relations between the Patient and Katherine on the one hand and Hana and Kip on the other allow Ondaatje to explore intimacy's creative and destructive character, a central focus of the next chapter of this dissertation where I deal with the novel's ability to represent trauma. With "[t]heir foreignness intimate like two pages of a closed book" (155), *The English Patient* makes clear how Almasy and Katherine are fundamentally at odds from the start. Consequently, through the novel's "love story... [a]s a consuming of oneself and the past" (97), the Patient is "disassembled" (168) by Katherine's "unconquerable face" (144, 155), while her relationship with him ends in her tragic death.

At a remove from the "fully named world" of the English Patient's childhood (22), *The English Patient* constantly tracks back to "disassemble" the affair between the Patient and Katherine. With the destructive violence of their encounters emphasised repeatedly (160-161, 163, 164-65, 255), the chapter entitled "Katherine" tells us of her beauty, love of lines of descent, tradition, ceremony and water (155-56, 170), and paints a vibrant picture of her life before she meets the Patient in Africa. Although Katherine "personified youth" (156), the burnt explorer is unable to fully quantify and explain Katherine's essence or her profoundly destabilising effect on *his* being. At one point, he is unable to venture into descriptions of her without retorting, "How do I explain her to you? With the use of my hands?" (249)

In the chapter "Katherine", Ondaatje also allows the Patient's dead lover to speak. In her memory of their violent intimacy, Katherine describes how the Patient put her body in a vice grip. While recording their passion by a "list of wounds" (153), both the Patient and Katherine have their bodies violated. This is ironically what they do to *each other* when intimate, "as if they could grip character and during love pull it right off the body of the other" (173). *The English Patient* presents three separate occasions where Katherine and the Patient attempt to disentangle from their relationship (167-168, 182-183, 249), suggesting both the intensity of their violent intimacy and the immensely severe psychological trauma their relationship has manifested, leaving both characters in a stripped state, barely mortal.

As the unwelcome third party to a doomed love triangle, Katherine's husband Geoffrey is "a man embedded in the English machine" (251), secretly tracking his wife's every move and giving a new dimension to notions that "all is fair in love and war". On the other hand, the novel demonstrates how Katherine reads both to experience an aesthetic sense of enjoyment and to seduce and captivate an audience. Fittingly, in her very first physical appearance, Katherine reads lines from a poem by John Milton to a male audience, captivating her husband, his male companions, and most of all, and the Patient – who involuntarily falls in love with her voice. By foreshadowing his later fall from grace like *Milton's* Satan, an example of Ondaatje's tendency to allow art and life to intersect in a palimpsestic way, Katherine will subsequently read the story of Candaules and Gyges from the Patient's *The Histories* in a gravely significant reading act. Since Ondaatje comments on "the interrelation of story and history with the events of oral life" (Ellis 34), a fictional story sets a real life affair in motion: "[Katherine] stopped reading and looked up... So power changed hands" (234).

With the effect of her storytelling again foregrounding the novel's reflective disclosure of how narratives influence life, Katherine exemplifies how "power change[s] hands" as she stands in for the story's queen, with Geoffrey performing the role of the proud, boastful Candaules and the Patient the intrepid Gyges. Just as Hana noted how characters read roles into fictional stories according to particular desires, pre-existing narratives influence those *under construction*. Therefore, Hana after reading *Kim* cuts her hair short to look "childlike", just as Kip does when visiting a statue of the Virgin Mary (223), while Hana shares dual father figures in Caravaggio and the Patient, just like Kip with the Patient and Lord Suffolk. Conversely, the sapper literally cuts the wires of the Patient's hearing aid to exclude him from a potential love triangle. While Caravaggio and Geoffrey are spies, we can read Geoffrey as the jealous, powerful cog in the English machine desiring to kill Katherine and Almasy. Although "this [is] in no way a portrait of Clifton", this is how he "[becomes] part of this story" (248), part of a greater communal vision or understanding.

After the fateful plane crash in the desert that kills Geoffrey instantly and fatally wounds Katherine, the Patient's failure to acknowledge her investment in the currency of naming renders him without recourse to save her. Although his knowledge of war technologies saves his *own* life, he promises to save her, but cannot do so due to his unwillingness to acknowledge her married name. In a desperate bid to rescue her he provides the Allied forces with his own name, "[w]hereas the only name [he] should have yelled, dropped like a calling card into their hands, was Clifton's" (250-251). As Katherine dies, left naked by desire, the Patient concedes how discomfiting the desert is for "a woman who had grown up with gardens..." (192), while the Patient notes how "she would have hated to die without a name" (170).

The Patient makes Katherine part of history, text, and art through his writing into Herodotus. He embeds her in the symbolic realm of myth and legend by ceremonially painting her face with ochre and blue paint, where personal history and story converge just as in *The Histories*: “There were traditions he had discovered in Herodotus in which old warriors celebrated their loved ones by locating and holding them in whatever world made them *eternal* – a colourful fluid, a song, a rock drawing” (248). By “locating” and “holding” the “eternal” through narrative, this moment recalls a scene from *In the Skin of a Lion*, where Patrick’s lover “wanted to paint his face, to follow the lines of his cheek and eyebrows with colours... He was less neutral now, his skin like the texture of a cave that would transform anything painted on it” (ISL 101). Unsettled by the “paranoia and claustrophobia of hidden love” (252) and unable to remain “neutral”, the Patient states, “[h]e himself would have been happier to die in a cave, with its privacy, the swimmers caught in the rock around them... [I]n Asian gardens you could look at *rock* and imagine *water*, you could gaze at a *still* pool and believe it had the *hardness* of *rock*” (181, my emphasis). This anticipates the cave locations of Sri Lanka and the blind alchemy of the epigraphist Palipana described in *Anil’s Ghost*, which I discuss in the next chapter. Poignantly, while the Patient desires to make her part of the spirit world, as no signifiers of identity but her “blue eyes” remained as “a naked map where nothing is depicted” (261), she is ironically only in death able to transcend the racial and cultural constructions of identity the Patient desires.

The destructive intimacy between the Patient and Katherine contrasts the constructive intimacy of Kip and Hana’s brief time together. Unlike the violence between the Patient and Katherine, Kip and Hana are considerate and careful in their intimacy while safeguarding one another’s integrity. Hana remains nomadic in contrast to Kip’s self-preservation, because “[r]evealing his past or the qualities of his characters would have been too loud a gesture” (97). Just like reading the Patient’s body, Hana reads the body of Kip, “[knowing] the look on his face. She can read it” (178). With “a face which in the darkness looked more like someone he knew. A sister. Someday a daughter” (80), Hana looks “as pure and as beautiful as the figure of the Virgin Mary rescued from destruction” (Ty 15). Similarly enthralled by Kip’s physicality and exoticism, Hana is in love with his hair that approximates “all of Asia”, a rich, golden lustre “like grain in a fan-shaped straw basket” (229), other mentions of Kip’s hair and turban feature on pages 197, 201, 229, 230 and 298, constantly emphasising how Kip’s aesthetic features render him different and isolated. Although Hana “learns all the varieties of [Kip’s] darkness” (134), and despite mapping Hana’s sadness “more than any other” (287), Kip leaves the Villa named as *fato profugus* – “fate’s fugitive” (290-291).

Ondaatje characterises the thief Caravaggio as a similar *fugitive of fate*, a foil for the Patient as self-destructive and self-effacing author-figure. Not only are the characters of Caravaggio and the English Patient analogous in many respects, but Ondaatje also uses Caravaggio’s character to explore notions of intimacy, violence and dislocation alongside (re)construction,

reading and relation. These explorations function to show how a dislocated sense of self closely connects to a lack of intimate relationships, which in turn foregrounds the novel's insistence on the close reading of the stories of others as a way to heal the self.

Caravaggio's character is sketched mostly in a chapter aptly titled "In Near Ruins," tracing his physical and mental deterioration from the exuberant vitality of his previous pre-war incarnation in Canada in *In the Skin of a Lion*, to his status in *The English Patient* as disfigured and emotionally malnourished thief. In a past life, Caravaggio "had been a thief, a married man, slipped through his chosen world with a lazy confidence" (42). Conversely, as wartime spy and explorer of interiors that is bereft of "confidence", he shifts between identities and locations, his sense of self under painful (re)construction after his torture at the hands of the Gestapo. The similar traumatic physical deterioration and injury between Caravaggio and the Patient is one of the text's various levels of connection, and extends to the novel's implicit sense of relation between writing or authorship and violence.

While "[w]ords did not emerge easily from Caravaggio" (268), his near-catatonia and physical and mental breakdown is reminiscent of Bolden's schizophrenia, and demonstrates how self-expression through writing, reading and telling, and also the inability to speak or construct a stable sense of self and story, are analogous with violence. The chapter dealing with *Divisadero* discusses further links between self-expression and autobiography. Caravaggio's physical mutilation echoes Buddy Bolden's "suicide of the hands" (*Coming Through Slaughter* 44), where the jazz musician's schizophrenia leads him to episodic and frightening self-destruction, in many ways similar to the Patient's self-destructive behavior. This self-destruction by Bolden opposes Caravaggio's torture by *others*: "So many murders of his own body. From the slammed fingernail through the sweat draining through his hair eventually bleeding brown into the neck of his shirt... So many varieties of murder" (44). The novel relays Caravaggio's tortuous ordeal in a fragmented, non-sequential manner (30, 54-55, 58-60), voicing the difficulty of trauma that leaves him an "unbalanced" "animal" (123).

Through glimpses into Caravaggio's character in *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient*, Ondaatje self-reflexively uncovers a travelling storyteller – cosmopolitan, always moving, always under attack or fire from those close to the material – in many ways just like the author figure in real life<sup>4</sup>. Unlike the Patient's love of various texts, "books are mystical creatures to [Caravaggio]" (86), unfamiliar and therefore discomfiting. In keeping with Solecki's earlier assertion that Ondaatje's characters are often tortured "artists", Hana "paints" her uncle as opaque artist figure and reader of locations under conditions of minimal light: "You used to be like those artists who painted only at night, a single light on..." (58). Caravaggio is unaware until told by the Patient that his name likely refers not only to a

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<sup>4</sup> This close relation carries over to *Divisadero*, where it would appear that Caravaggio makes a post-war appearance with a new family in France.

Renaissance statue by Michelangelo, but possibly to the painting *David with the Head of Goliath* by Baroque artist Merisi da Caravaggio. The Patient states that “[i]t is assumed that the face of David is a portrait of the youthful Caravaggio and the head of Goliath is a portrait of him as an older man... Youth judging age at the end of its outstretched hand” (116). This mention of an “outstretched hand” suggests a sense of relation between the Patient, Caravaggio and Kip, when the Patient says to Caravaggio “I think when I see him at the foot of my bed that Kip is my David” (116). Johan Jacobs argues that *The English Patient* uses intertextuality and art in order to speak to a *new* kind of metafictional history:

Ondaatje’s choice of a painter who is both the heir to an artistic tradition within which he continued to work and an initiator of a new direction is a significant one for a postcolonial novelist who inserts himself into a tradition of fiction writing in which he works “innovatively”. (60)

In order to reflect on his own life-story and trauma, “Caravaggio travels within the code of signals” (263), refuelling the morphine syringe whenever he feels he has lost track of the Patient’s story. The Patient’s subsequent revelations of his own fallibility connect to self-disclosure, which, as Dawson notes, is a kind of testimony. (50-73) The Patient, delusional after many morphine injections, tells stories of his visits to deserts and gardens, comparing himself with a book that seemingly does not require mutual investment from Caravaggio, his reader: ‘You must *talk* to me Caravaggio. Or am I just a book?’ (269). While listening to the Patient’s story, Caravaggio acknowledges that the Patient is indeed far more than “just a book”, “still amazed at the clarity of discipline in the man, who speaks sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third person, who still does not admit that he is Almasy” (247).

Without an admission of himself as Almasy, caught between the first and the third person, the Patient’s body (through his oral narrative of his experiences) aligns culture and art, both the transcendental and the timeless in art and real life: “Caravaggio watches the pink in the man’s mouth as he talks. The gums perhaps the light iodine colour of the *rock paintings* discovered in Uweinat” (247, my emphasis). Because the Patient’s ongoing “death” allows him the liberty and distance to comment on his own story, he is simultaneously as self-less and as self-aware as possible, painting a vivid and hyper-real picture through his memories of tragedy. He tells Caravaggio that “[d]eath means you are in the third-person” (244), caught between being at the forefront and in the background of the telling an apocryphal story. The English Patient and Caravaggio are ultimately aware of the fact that Almasy and the English Patient are not the same person, and not bordered and self-explanatory personas. By reading the Patient’s “deathlike posture” (62) as he would approach a “rock painting”, the thief sees “[t]here is more to discover, more to divine out of this body on the bed, nonexistent except for a mouth, a vein in the arm, wolf-grey eyes” (247).

In writings that attempt to “discover” and “divine” more from the Patient as “eternally dying man” (115), Annick Hillger connects Caravaggio’s corporeal close readings of the burnt explorer to Certeau’s theoretical readings in *The Writing of History* (279). Certeau’s sepulchral form of historiography, comparable to Ondaatje’s metafictional *The English Patient*, excavates entombed stories through a “*language of the body, a topography of holes and valleys: orifices (the mouth, the eye) and internal cavities*” (Certeau cited in Hilger 41, my emphasis). By reading the Patient’s body and story as a particular kind of *trompe l’oeil*, a disarming blend of the natural and cultural domain as artefacts that seem to represent a kind of reality but that are also irreconcilably *other*, Caravaggio projects his own disfigured, animal-like countenance onto the Patient’s self-geography and self-disclosure. He not only links the Patient’s appearance as a wild animal (“wolf”) to his own sense of self-loss, but also connects the Patient via his mouth’s innermost regions to the desert cave paintings in Uweinat, as projective spectacle reflective of his *own* traumatic experiences.

This projection is another textual example where an active conflation between corporeal bodies and bodies of landscape presents itself. As stated previously, this emphasises the way in which *The English Patient* as a whole reveals that intimacies in various reading relationships between readers and books are reflective of relationships between characters in the novel, and reflective of the corporeal intimacies between subjects in the real world. Since “only *desire* makes the story *errant*” (263), the Patient must account for his desires and make sense of his journey culminating in a wayward exit from society and an intimate, violent relationship with his beloved Katherine. Consequently, the Patient’s “apocryphal story” (263) allows him and Caravaggio to revisit defining moments of the burnt explorer’s discoveries, fuelled by “desire” and made “errant” by the open-endedness of his story: “Caravaggio picks up the Herodotus. He turns a page, comes over a dune to discover the Gilf Kebir, Uweinat, Gebel Kissu. When Almásy speaks he sits alongside him reordering the events” (263).

The Patient’s anonymity and identification also means that he must uncover and resurface his own sense of moral direction. The Patient questions his desire for social severance: “Was I a curse upon them? For her? For Madox? For the desert raped by war, shelled as if it were just sand? (257). After many draining yet cathartic “hearings” that dig through a “desert” of malleable memories, Caravaggio’s (im)patient interrogations – both “curse” and blessing – allow him to recognise the need to move *beyond* trauma. By finally listening to others’ stories and particularly the Patient’s, he informs Hana “we can let him be”, that “[i]t no longer mattered which side he was on during the war” (265, 251). The Patient’s revelations help Caravaggio to connect Hana’s “translation” (235) from a shell-shocked nurse “raped by war” like the desert, to a more carefree individual through corporeal close readings, revealing how “she had grown towards who she now was” (234-235).



Before the presentation of revelations regarding Hana's "translation", Ondaatje immediately presents Hana's self-effacing relations to others, just like the similarly effusive characterisation of Caravaggio and Kip. In this section I discuss how Hana's strong textual presence and important relationships with the novel's main characters allow her an autonomy and strong voice as author-figure, actively working against a sense of finality in interpretation and against criticisms of *misogyny* in Ondaatje's work. After losing both a child and potential father and husband, a tangible sense of detachment pervades even the civil life of Hana's playful games of hopscotch. Since she "need[s] an uncle, a member of the family" (90) to realise the need for the telling of her own life-story, Hana is convinced that "[i]t doesn't matter what side [the Patient] was on during the war" (165). Her desperation and desire to cultivate a father-daughter relationship with a man trapped in a "lonely garden" at the Villa, echoes Ondaatje's poem "Taking" in *The Cinnamon Peeler*:

It is the formal need

To suck blossoms out of the flesh

In those we admire

*Planting* them *private* in the brain

And cause fruit in *lonely gardens* (*The Cinnamon Peeler* 41, my emphasis).

By taking her view of the Patient quite literally at *face value*, "planting" a "private" and "formal need" to "suck blossoms" of understanding and sensitivity from his "flesh", Hana's need for relation is projected not only onto the *Patient*, but onto various fictional *texts*. Her (re)reading and subsequent writing of her own experiences into literary works she admires like the Patient is what enables her sense of relation to others, and enables her involvement in a textual and human *community* made up of similarly dislocated subjects. This sense of a community of suffering reinforces this chapter's argument regarding the novel's boundary-crossing reflections, illuminating how intimate and corporeal relationships between books and readers reflect analogous relationships between human beings in the real world.

Hana's patient cartography of the Patient's body literally establishes a touching propinquity, where she loves "the *hollow* below the lowest rib, its *cliff* of *skin*" (4, my emphasis). By intimately exploring and mapping the "hollows" and "cliffs" of various "skins", or the corporeal experiences and interiority of various characters, Ondaatje encourages readers of *The English Patient* to bear witness to close relationships between corporeality and textuality, bodies and texts. This recalls the authorial desire in Ondaatje's fictionalised memoir *Running in the Family* to make "hollow" stories and memories "thick" and materially present, to

“touch them into words” (22), in order “make the story errant” (*EP* 263). The strong links between corporeality and textuality in Ondaatje’s fiction is again prominent in *Anil’s Ghost*. As author-figure, the Patient is like Scheherazade from *A Thousand and One Nights*, telling stories to prevent death, and equally so, he desires to keep his body alive, the vessel that allows him to live long enough to tell his tale, his apocryphal story.

The Patient’s fragmented and open-ended storytelling takes place while Hana “unskins the plum with her teeth... and passes the flesh of the fruit into his mouth” (4). Johansson outlines this form of care and healing as follows:

The relationship between the Patient and Hana can be read as secular paraphrase of the iconographic option of the sacred Pieta, a depiction of the “dead” Christ-like Patient- the colour of whose body is “[b]eyond purple,” which is the symbolic colour of the Passion in the context of the Christian liturgy- and the Virgin Mary, tenderness incarnate. Secondly, there is the metafictional reading, where Hana represents the life-giving reader and the English Patient represents the dead text, which needs to be revived in order to produce words from “that well of memory”. (4, 88)

This tableau of nurse and Patient suggests a resurrection of a dead textual body through close reading, an intimate revelation of *self* or new beginning, with Hana’s patient readings each day bringing various textual fragments together in a fragmented way. Her *discontinuous* readings to the Patient have “gaps of plot like sections of road washed away by storms, missing incidents as if locusts had consumed section of tapestry, as if plaster loosened by the bombing had fallen away from a mural at night” (7). A close reading of the “tapestry” of this passage demonstrates how reading in the novel is a gradual and dis-continuous process, a process gathering fragmented “sections of tapestry” after “storms” and “bombings”. Hana develops a steadily growing intimacy with the *Patient’s* story, with novels found in the Villa’s abandoned library, and with the life-stories of Caravaggio and Kip. She starts to live in her own world of words, “so it would seem... [that] the corporal body had disappeared” (12). Her immersive readings of the fictional and real-life stories of others is such a powerful and all-encompassing activity that it eventually appears that her “corporeal body” disappears and that she becomes a singular body holding various fragmented *bodies* of text, ultimately enabling her to actively produce a sense of relation and community to others.

At various points in the narrative Hana reads to the Patient from various books (5, 6, 7, 8, 93, 94), amongst others from Rudyard Kipling (*Kim*), James Fenimore Cooper (*The Last of the Mohicans*), and Daniel Defoe (*Robinson Crusoe*), with allusions to Tacitus, Stendhal, and others. These texts are connected by their questioning representations of relations between Western subjects and that of the exotic racial other, mirrored in Ondaatje’s investigation of various relationships in the novel. Because “[Hana] could not be more thoroughly interpellated by the discipline” (Ismail 411), an intimate relationship emerges between Hana

and various texts. As Hana “had gone into the library, removed twenty books and nailed them to the floor and then onto each other, in this way rebuilding the two lowest steps” (14), she *literally* uses books as stepping stones to (re)construct a greater sense of ontological certainty in her life. Abu Baker notes that “Hana’s use of the books to repair the stairs parallels the readers’ and critics’ attempt to ‘nail’ all the different books and images Ondaatje refers to in his novel to reach, as if climbing a staircase, into the ‘room’ where knowledge is stored” (98).

Unable to *speak* of her trauma, the reserved Hana supplements her story by “climbing a staircase” into the room of knowledge and understanding, inscribing “on[to] the flyleaf of Kim what [Kip] has told her about the Zam-zammah cannon” before she “closes the book, climbs onto a chair and nestles the book into the high, invisible shelf” (11). Ondaatje’s choice of words like “closes”, “climbs” and “nestles” allows us to infer that Hana’s readings and the readings in the novel as a whole are distinctly active and purposeful, while the use of the word “nestle” discloses the locatedness and intimacy of such readings. This sense of locatedness highlights links between character and theme and the purpose that the Villa, desert and garden serve, foregrounding and illuminating interiority and experience.

By reading stories of others, Hana is immersed in “the lives of others” (12), with her “body full of sentences and moments” (13). This sense of plenitude and richness of her reading experiences allows the nurse to read a sense of relation towards the male characters at the Villa, as the displaced Hana becomes an explorer and author-figure just like the Patient, Caravaggio and Kip: “The day seems to have no order until these times, which are like a ledger for her, her body full of stories and situations” (38). Permitted a sense of order through intimate and close reading, Hana’s satisfaction fulfils a part of her desire for immersion and escape, that is to say some of her traumatic memories are finally allowed to *die*. With her body full of stories and situations, we sense that Hana moves beyond mere reading of texts into an actual (re)construction and production of meaning. She uses a “fountain pen” to “translate experiences from her “ledger” (132), while she wants to show Kip Canada’s *Smoke Lake* (137), again emphasising how Kip is tied to explosives, fire and smoke in the novel.

Very differently to Hana, Kip “move[s] at a speed that allow[s] him to replace loss” (272). As a result of such “movement”, this section of my argument traces the novel’s characterisation of Kip and his relations to explosives and Empire, showing how constant travelling and dislocation from communal relations juxtaposes his attempts to maintain a sense of authenticity in his own life. The novel shows – when it is Kip’s turn to adopt the guise of the author-figure – how Kip is distanced from conventional texts and people while constantly in danger of *misreading* explosives. This underscores the novel’s depiction of art, particularly religious frescoes and sculptures, where the timeless interconnectivity of artefacts makes relation without misreading possible for Kip. This sense of an artistic community is ultimately what establishes Kip’s sense of togetherness and intimacy with art rather than

people – ironically made possible by the conditions of war – while Kip’s continuous interaction with explosives mirrors the novel’s insistence on the potentially violent process of reading and writing. This in turn connects Kip, the Patient, Lord Suffolk and Caravaggio as a quartet of similarly wounded and saint-like sufferers in search of healing, mainly at the Villa.

Even as Ondaatje unearths fragments of Kip’s personal history through disclosure of his family ties, childhood and upbringing in India (87, 291, 211, 214, 237-38), and presents glimpses of Kip’s vitality and playfulness at times (84-86, 220, 231), the most insightful and important writings about Kip in *The English Patient* seem to concern his otherness and alterity in relation to Empire. While the Patient seeks to erase himself from connections to the nation-state, Kip “has his own faith after all” (80), and is similarly wary of national conflicts throughout the text, particularly during the section at the novel’s end relating the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Contrastingly, Ondaatje suggests the nation and traditional family as potentially connective when Kip returns to his home in India at the novel’s close. He is vigilant to the various destructive instruments utilised in war’s battle for political and territorial supremacy, with personalised rank and title according to their destructive capabilities: “A 2000-pound bomb was called a ‘Hermann’ or an ‘Esau.’ A 4000-pound bomb was called a ‘Satan’” (195). As mentioned earlier, Ondaatje provides suspenseful, incredibly detailed accounts of Kip’s dismantling of these explosives, close readings that allow him, just like frail body the Patient, to *live* in order to *die* another day.

The novel mentions Kip’s racial difference repeatedly, not only showing how Kip is distanced from those at the Villa, but from any lasting connection to the British Empire. Kip’s racially charged, explosive presence in the novel is reflected in a scene where Hana walks into a room where the Patient talks to Kip, just as his explosive presence is disclosed in the sections dealing with Kip’s relation to Lord Suffolk: “She disliked [the] casual handling of the gun, his lazy spin towards her entrance as if his body where the axis of a wheel, as if the weapon had been sewn along his shoulders and arms and into his small brown wrists (94). Such a description, utilising words and phrases like “casual”, “small brown wrists” and “lazy spin” leaves us with the sense that Kip is tragically unaware of his own complicity in the colonial project, while Kip’s body becomes the central, embodied “axis” of a coldly calculating “wheel”, one that “spins” a distorted version of reality to subaltern subjects like Kip. Because it appears that Kip’s body has now become the ballistic bearer of a “sewn” colonial inscription, violently yet stealthily “sewn along his shoulders” and into his “small brown wrists”, he is rendered both powerless and “small” in the face of Empire, a “giant” he must face with only the “weapon” of integrity on his small shoulders.

Correspondingly, seeing as *The English Patient* finds Kip at a remove from others through his race (193, 199-200, 208-209), a particularly resonant example finds Kip visiting Lord Suffolk in the English Countryside. Ondaatje writes how Kip, while riding a horse,

descended, down into the giant white chalk horse of Westbury, into the whiteness of the horse, carved into the hill... [A] black figure, the background radicalizing the darkness of his skin... To them it would it would loom like he was striding down a paper map cut out in the shape of an animal. (195)

A close reading of this deceptively complex, emblematic passage not only discloses how Kip as “black figure” swathed in “darkness” “looms” in the “shape of an animal”, but how his appearance as a “dark” and threatening racial other renders him unable to be fully assimilated into the British high culture. Concomitantly, Kip first “descends” upon and then “rides” a “giant white chalk horse”, his “darkness” descending into the “whiteness” of both the horse and the hill. This shows how the English countryside and its horses have become conflated, pallid and colourless, and more importantly, how the “radical background” of the politics of location and race cannot be escaped, particularly during a time of World War. Such situated and embodied political relations that present Kip on “a paper map cut in the shape of an animal” tentatively mollify him, before enraging the sapper later on when he becomes aware of the extreme violence implicit in the “cutting” of any map to suit only a distorted colonial “shape”.

As “one of the charmed” (283) that nonetheless remains “an anonymous member of another race” (197), Kip has a tragic flaw, which is his awareness of “everything *except* what was temporary and human” (230). In a similar manner, with Kip’s ability to “hide in silent places” (212-213), it is unsurprising that the novel consistently positions him in characteristically noiseless and muted spaces, locations like churches that for the sapper are awe-inspiring in their quietude and silent reverie. When the novel foreshadows Kip’s “explosion” at its end through his reading of the Patient as the face of English “meadows of civilisation” (294), and his corporeal close reading of bombs, the Villa and Hana, “Kip apotheosises the ethics of reading by candlelight: a reading that is finally, and fundamentally, a *looking*, and which therefore notes the *value*, the inherent *life*, of what is *missed in bright light*” (Rosenfeld, 311, my emphasis). In the chapter “Sometime a Fire”, Kip becomes aware of the “value” and “life” of the artistic realm. He is able to “read” how – because it is “missed” in the “bright light” of day – “[c]haracter, that subtle art, disappeared among them those days and nights, exist[ing] only on a book or painted on a wall” (98).

Accordingly, through Kip’s interaction with Renaissance art, the text demonstrates the blurring of narrative and representational boundaries between art and life, and a form of revelation and re-birth, a new beginning that mitigates isolation and displacement. Where others quite literally *step back* or retreat from war by reading/writing and listening to the stories of others, Kip finds solace and succour in art’s physically constructive and creative dimensions, performing the novel’s supplementary connections between discourses of science, religion and art, while highlighting vivid intersections (Goldman 908). While I discussed the function and nature of books in the previous sections of this chapter, I now

argue that *The English Patient's* representation of statues relates closely to the novel's exploration of various material textual forms like books, spatial bodies like landscapes and corporeal bodies capable of engendering intimacy and close relations.

The English Patient, Lord Suffolk, Katherine and Hana are the characters Ondaatje most clearly links to books, while the author through Kip's interactions with statues presents a view of statues as materially concrete and timeless objects that offer a groundedness, clarity of form, security and certainty in their appearance and nature that contrasts the mobility, malleability and flexibility of the novel form and books in general. Although books present to the aforementioned quartet of readers an outlet to relate to the outside world and to other characters through *text*, statues offer for Kip a form of connection and relation to the artistic rather than social world, paradoxically presenting to the sapper a *reclusive* form of communal relations that allows for a form of self-expression and self-recognition amid the debris of war.

For Kip, amelioration after the witnessing of violence is sought in holy church spaces like the Church of San Giovanni a Carbonara, sleeping beside "parental" "terracotta figures painted the colour of white humans" (279, 280), part of a "race of stones" (104) with Isaiah as its "sentinel" (104). Kip's sense of revelation is particularly resonant in a montage where he uses his military flare to light the religious location of the Sistine Chapel so that he can gaze on the artistic portrait of Isaiah by Michelangelo, through the eyes of both a soldier and scientist. Such intersections between disciplines and ways of looking foreground intersubjectivity and interconnectivity where art and the novel have aesthetic but also ethical imperatives. Kip concludes that "there was no order but for the great maps of art that showed judgement, piety and sacrifice" (70), while he has a similarly revelatory moment in the Arezzo church, "struck by the face of the Queen of Sheba as she kneels down... [Having] seen in a vision that the Saviour of the world would one day be crucified on the wood of that tree" (70). With the Patient subsequently referred to as a "fir" (238) by Kip, and the sapper connected to rivers by Hana, while Caravaggio crosses a bridge only to be thrown into an inflamed river, this tableau is a relative fragment gesturing towards the novel's "character" as a whole.

Likewise, during the activities of the Virgin Mary's Marine Festival at the Gabbice Mare, Kip *sees* the relation between religious, scientific and artistic ways of intimately witnessing and understanding the world. Delbaere comments that "[a]s in Arezzo, picking up a target in a soldier's sights leads not to the expected act of killing but to the recognition of a shared humanity running counter to the logic of war" (50). Kip's evocative final visit to the Virgin Mary suggests a revelatory "debate over his fate" (299), bringing Kip into close contact with the artistic artifacts that have survived and found new beginnings amid the surrounding wreckage of war. This "debate" is not only an example of the novel's self-reflexive staging of the intersection of various textual and human elements, but anticipates Kip's decision to leave the Villa's tentative community after finding closure through the *tromps l'oeil* of

frescoes and sculpture: “[...] [T]here seems to be no time here... The raised terracotta arm a stay of execution... for the sleeper, child-like, foreign-born” (299).

Kip, after this fateful final visit as a “sleeper” where there seems to be “no time”, ironically sees that “there will be no more revelation” (297), unaware of the “powerful” nuclear storm that will follow shortly (297). After spending much of the narrative dismantling various explosives, in his final “stay of execution” at the Villa, Kip tragically misreads how all the bombs he defuses throughout the narrative add up to a singular nuclear nightmare. Aware that he has lost his *reason for being* at the Villa in the first place, his *raison d’être*, Kip has an epiphany while listening to a report of the atomic bombing told from the American side. Before feeling the revelation of Asian annihilation with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Kip “[turns] away from mystery books with irritation, able to pinpoint villains with too much ease” (112), while immediately after listening to a report casting the Patient as a villainous “Englishman” with a “fragile white island” that stands for “precise behaviour” (283). While condemning his brother’s criticism of the West, he now changes his mind after a “history lesson”: “They would never have dropped such a bomb on a white nation” (286).

After “dropping the bomb” or the revelation of Kip’s reaction to the atomic bombings, the novel leaves matters largely unresolved between the sapper and his “ghost” (50). Kip leaves the Villa, he symbolically “carries” the Patient’s body and story “against the direction of the invasion” (290). Kip strips off his uniform’s insignia during his final act of defiance, leaving on his motorbike to return to India from Florence. By discarding the colonial moniker of “Kip” and returning to his filiative roots as Kirpal Singh, Kip becomes a newly liberated citizen of India, if not the world. This foreshadows how the text produces a vision of Kip’s future that stands on its own as part of a larger argument, while allowing for a form of reflection on the novel’s journey and the journeys of its characters up to this point.

Ultimately, Ondaatje has authored a metafictional history demonstrating how the reading and (re)writing of a form of history – exposing the boundary-crossing and interconnective links between art and real life, and between texts, bodies and landscapes – can be (re)constructed to form a communal and apocryphal story. In order to trace this communal and relational character of *The English Patient*, it is productive to invoke the epigraph of *In the Skin of a Lion*, by making use of a John Berger quote: “Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one”. This inclusive gesture is reflected also in the said novel itself, where “[Patrick’s] own life was no longer a single story but part of a mural, which was falling together of accomplices. [He] saw a wondrous night web- all of these *fragments* of a human order... the *detritus* and *chaos* of the age was *realigned*” (ISL145, my emphasis).

To “realign” the “fragments” of such “detritus” and “chaos”, Ondaatje gestures towards a *tentative* community by presenting descriptions of characters – most notably Kip, the Patient and Hana – as saint-like figures. This reinforces my reading of the novel as apocryphal story with a tangible sense of quasi-religious significance attached to its largely personal (re)construction of history from perspectives of the margins. Early on, Hana refers to the Patient as a “despairing saint” (3), an act of telling or revelation repeated when informing Caravaggio that he is a “saint. A despairing saint” (45). Hana is also referred to as saint-like in “the way she crawls in against [Kip’s] body like a saint” (128), with Kip a “visionary” “warrior saint” (209, 217). Referential similarity thus establishes communal saint-like status insofar as it speaks to their “sainthood”, arguably the shared condition binding their experiences, firstly demonstrated on the level of intense suffering.

This suffering is uncovered through *Hana’s* loss of a stepfather, unborn child and potential father to her child, the Patient’s physical burning and emotional anguish, and Kip’s dislocation from his place of birth and branding as colonial subject. Additionally, all three characters are connected and related through their devotion to specific people, principles or ways of life. Thus, Hana is intensely devoted to the Patient; Kip is devoted to a stoic lifestyle; while the Patient is devoted to his ideal of a world without nations or maps. The text establishes the third level of relation through ways in which characters “save” others or find a form of salvation and communal sense of healing at the Villa. Hana tentatively saves the Patient from death in a “painted”, “lonely” garden, Kip saves Hana from a bomb in the Villa, and the Patient “saves” Hana by exposing her to more than just visions of suffering and loss.

The repeated refrain of characters in search of or drinking wine in the novel evokes comparisons to the Biblical miracle where Christ turned water into wine, not only supported by the fact that the novel’s apocryphal story has characters at the Villa have a dinner party for Hana after Caravaggio “finds” three bottles of wine, but foregrounded by the significance of the names of characters in a Biblical sense. Within the Judao-Christian tradition, *Hannah* is regarded as a remarkable woman because she was without a child for many years until blessed by a child in reward of her unwavering faith. On a related note, seeing as Caravaggio’s first name is *David* and the novel invokes the painting *David and the head of Goliath* by the artist Merisi da Caravaggio, it is worth noting that the Bible writes not only about the mortal David who slays the giant Goliath, but writes the story of *King David*, who was the righteous second king of Israel that rules over the united Kingdom.

Analogous to the story of King David that recognises a warrior and acclaimed musician and poet credited with the composition of many verses contained in the Book of Psalms, *The English Patient’s* characterises Caravaggio as a multi-faceted persona, one whose apocryphal story is both mythical and fictional, by turns “painting” him like *trompe l’oeil* as a thief, an artist, an author-figure, spy and wounded animal, wandering through the desert towards a



better tomorrow and improved version of himself. Although Caravaggio is a flawed character and clearly no king, he however does produce three honourable feats in *The English Patient*: He fulfils the important function of allowing the English Patient to disclose his personal history and memories, helps Kip to see his exclusion from the hallowed gates of Empire, and aids Hana to work through her traumatic loss of a father, husband and unborn child.

Whereas conceptions of “sainthood” and acts of care and consideration underscore the novel’s representation of communal relation, Bolland argues that *The English Patient* shows a pattern of togetherness and (re)constructive community, patterns Ajay Heble also identifies in *In the Skin of a Lion*. Concerned with two critical kinds of belonging and consciousness, the functional character of the family in a “relative”, non-traditional sense in the novel relates to Edward Said’s terms of “filliation” and “affiliation” (Heble 242, quoting Said). These affiliative relations in *The English Patient* replace those based on birth and place of origin. Whereas filliation describes relationships based on “direct genealogical descent,” related to establish and reflect natural and biological continuity between generations, “affiliation” points towards form of relation based on “social and political conviction, economic and historical circumstances, voluntary effort and willed deliberation” (Heble 242, quoting Said).

In an important scene representing communal relations in the novel near its end, Caravaggio’s gift for Hana’s birthday is a dinner party. In a buoyant scene suggesting healing and community, Ondaatje creates a profoundly human and humane site of connection through the shared presence of others, just like all the Villa’s inhabitants listen to the Patient’s stories from *The Histories*. To “celebrate the age”, Kip fills forty-five snail shells with oil, forming “a string of small electric candles” (267), while Caravaggio recalls Hana as a child singing the Marseillaise. Singing the French anthem after telling Kip “[t]his is for you” (267), this recalls an earlier scene where the characters gather around a record player in the Patient’s room, while race, class and gender are kept at bay: “They had celebrated in this evening’s brief dance in the English Patient’s room their own simple adventures...” (112), while “[j]ust fifty yards away, there had been no representation of them in the world...” (112).

Correspondingly, the many musical references in *The English Patient* anticipate the role of music as communal language in Ondaatje’s latest novel *Divisadero* – a point I discuss in relation to said novel – while functioning as a form of affiliative connection between wounded characters at the Villa San Girolamo. Among the songs mentioned in the novel are “How Long Has This Been Going On” by George and Ira Gershwin (118, 120), “Manhattan” and “My Romance” by Lorenz Hart (118-119), “Solitude” by Duke Ellington (180), and other tracks like “Honeysuckle Rose”, “My Sweet”, “Souvenirs” and “When I take my sugar to tea” (254, 255, 254, 254, 75). These pre- and post-war songs connect through their *shared* focus on love stories, individual experience, solitude and memory, and once again foreground the importance of these themes during the course of *The English Patient*.

Trompe l'oeil – which literally translates from the French into “deceive the eye” – is a form of painting that creates the illusion of three-dimensionality and a falsely realistic sense of the natural. The novel provides four references to trompe l'oeil: two of those references are made when speaking of the Patient's room as “garden”, with the other references made regarding the Villa's library and when referring to the desert (3-4, 42, 85, 270). These written references arguably not only dramatise and bring to life how Ondaatje writes about and (re)constructs history as apocryphal story – through the artificial means of the novel's form and content that nonetheless reflect a reality outside the text – but foreground how each main location influences the politics of locatedness and action of the novel. In the process, the references to trompe l'oeil highlight the novel's emphasis on the stories of individual characters, where each revelation of personal history becomes the means whereby Ondaatje paints a picture of character as “great art”, to invoke Friedrich Nietzsche.

With various personal narratives suggesting an emerging symmetry between form and content, personal and political history, and real life and art, *The English Patient's* character-driven historiography is ultimately interconnective and circular. Starting with Hana, the Patient, Kip and then Caravaggio are characterised as placed in the Villa's garden. The novel concludes with the Patient's story metaphorically laid to rest while Kip evocatively “carries” his body to a different continent when travelling to India. However, the narrative does not end there. By refusing closure in its historiographical full disclosure, at the novel's end, “the personal will forever be at war with the public” (292), with *no single story* told again. Ultimately, as the novel's most dislocated character, Hana's story requires the readers to fill in the gaps actively. By the novel's end, Ondaatje allows a voice outside of the novel's diegesis to intrude, confirming by its ironic presence that the novel is insufficient in its study of history. This voice notes that, unlike Kip, Hana has “not found her own company, the ones she wanted” (301). She is both a victim of war's characteristic severing of connections, and gains a form of insight into the world after her time at the Villa. It remains up to the reader to imagine a future for the nurse, one where she is able to “find her own company”.

Through the inclusion of four closely connected author-figures, the Patient, Caravaggio, Hana and Kip in a communal vision of embodied existence, Ondaatje refuses the “truth-value” of the traditional author figure as the reader's desire for finality and closure is denied. With the death of one author figure in the Patient (whose narrative directs the novel), and with Caravaggio left to wander in the wilderness after his traumatic revelations, Ondaatje suggests that the stories of Hana and Kip are the keys to unlock the novel's most valued forms of authorship and readership. While leaving Hana, just like Caravaggio, to roam *in the skin of a lion*, Ondaatje places Kip in a *garden* upon his return to India, a “square patch of dry cut grass that triggers him back to the months he spent with Hana and Caravaggio and the English Patient north of Florence in the Villa San Girolamo” (299).

Subsequently, Kip sits in the “small garden his wife has nurtured” (318): “It seems every month or two he *witnesses* [Hana] this way, as if these *moments of revelation* are a continuation of the letters she wrote to him for a year, getting no reply, until she stopped sending them, turned away by his *silence*” (319, my emphasis). These “moments of revelation” are not “stern” (38) visions of destruction or chaos, but intimate and reflective reminders of his need to maintain an intimacy with those close to him. Where race earlier conspired towards his colonial exclusion, it now brings Kip a sense of community: “At this table, all of their hands are brown. They move with ease in their customs and habits” (301).

Like with the subsequent endings of both *Anil's Ghost* and *Divisadero*, Ondaatje presents a substantial affirmation of humane relations between subjects at the end of *The English Patient*. In a central communal gesture in the middle of the novel, Kip saves Caravaggio and Hana when a fuse box is knocked off a counter, but “[b]efore it reaches the floor Kip's body slides underneath it, and he catches it in his hand... he thinks suddenly [they owe] him a life” (208). By collapsing space and time between moments, the relation that similarly ends the novel sees Hana dislodging a glass from her kitchen cupboard, while Kip, with “a wrinkle at the edge of his eyes behind his spectacles” (302) simultaneously catches his daughter's dropped fork. This provides novelistic grounds for Ondaatje to suggest that the writing of history can be located in the aesthetic and ethical domains, and that care and compassion should know no bounds. As the novel provides its final moment of revelation it fittingly concludes, and readers must subsequently re-read the novel to re-enter its fictional domain.

Throughout the course of Ondaatje's metafictional history, *The English Patient* “unlocks” a “maze” of interior and exterior worlds (*Collected Works* 26). By telling an apocryphal story – fictitious, mythical, intertextual and unconventional – the novel's multiple levels of (re)construction of narratives mirror the continuous (re)construction of identities and connections to an (af)iliative community. Through “novelistic” trial by fire and revelation, the novel discloses the status of various historical (in the case of the Patient) or fictional characters, interconnected through the corporeal reading and writing process. As the relational triumvirate of cartography, the gaze and naming is demonstrated, the Villa's four inhabitants gradually form different parts of a fragmented whole, referencing and completing each other's narratives in a textual tapestry woven out of many different strands.

Through various stories and with knowledge gathered from experience and perception as much as from writing and reading, characters in *The English Patient* desire new beginnings after various revelations. By telling an apocryphal story through supplementation and intertextuality, Ondaatje demonstrates how “no story is told just once” (*Running in the Family* 26). Similarly, in order to show how “a word is at home in desire” (Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* 163), Ondaatje excavates the beauty and loss universally consonant in apocryphal stories of love, war, separation and community. With every character “[assuming]

the skins of wild animals” in order to “take responsibility for the story” (*ISL* 163), *The English Patient*’s tentative healing points towards the *book of life* as immersive, gradually unfolding story, written and read one day and one word at a time.

With the novel’s apocryphal storytelling, refusing to privilege a single position of authorship and authority over the individual stories of a community, characters in *The English Patient* are given the authority to either embrace their silence or to tell their own stories. In the next chapter, I build on this assertion by discussing Ondaatje’s intimate and ethical way of writing about trauma in *Anil’s Ghost*.

## Chapter 2

### ***“Coming Through Trauma” – Violence, (Dis)location and Intimacy in *Anil’s Ghost****

In terror we lean in the direction that is most unlike us. Running past your own character into pain.

- Michael Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter*

When cities crack, do people too, their lives disintegrating?

- Ishtiyak Shukri, *The Silent Minaret*

Only the best art can order the chaotic tumble of events. Only the best art can realign chaos to suggest both the chaos and the order it will become.

- Michael Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion*

To see a World in a grain of Sand and Heaven in a Wild Flower,

Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand, and Eternity in an Hour...

- William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*

In an interview with Maya Jaggi, Ondaatje states that he has “always been interested in archaeology” (252). Following this authorial assertion, by suggesting that *Anil’s Ghost* is a study of death because it is an archaeological study of *past life*, the critic Rachel Cusk argues that the novel “is a study of death: death as a science, as a fact, as a threat, as an absence attended by a memory, as a presence deserted by life” (56). On a related note, David Farrier views *Anil’s Ghost* as “characterised by traumas: of distance, of the body, and of memory” (83). By using these three closely related quotes to frame my own reading of the novel, I argue in this chapter that Ondaatje’s trauma/witness writing about the Sri Lankan Civil War between 1983 and 2009 discloses a personal rather than political version of recent history that investigates the nature of such events.

One of the signal strengths of the novel form in this regard is that it is able to demonstrate the personal experience of trauma; the way trauma is experienced firstly as both a physical and psychological event that affects the psyche of the individual, a shock to the subject’s intimate knowledge of self and world. At the same time, the novel can insist on trauma as communal

and political: in fact, it has the ability to chart precisely this close connection between subjective interiority and the outside world, to show how political terror becomes a private nightmare, and the way private nightmares are always already situated in the intersubjective political domain. The need for closure, for some transcendent meaning or truth to ameliorate the spectacle of suffering, becomes particularly pressing. Ondaatje's trauma writing commendably avoids providing this kind of resolution, and this perhaps explains why his critics find his work so problematic, taking issue with his insistence of neutrality.

Due to the strength of the novel as a boundary-crossing yet open-ended form of writing, such trauma writing discloses forms of death in order to present a sensitive close reading of experience, facilitated through an aesthetic form. The novel then gathers more than the fragments of a *single* story to perform a palimpsestic overlaying of corporeal human voices through various fragmented yet inter-connected stories. Consequently, Ondaatje's writings connect various individual stories of trauma and loss without ultimately (re)constructing an authoritative truth and knowledge. While speaking back to trauma through a collection of closely intertwined voices, *Anil's Ghost* ultimately suggests a vision of one shared fate, a communal vision of truth and knowledge, and a valorisation of the intimate, local and aesthetic as timeless answers that address personal and public trauma in the outside world.

In order to sustain such an argument, I look closely at the ways in which the novel's intentionally fragmented form and content can in fact be viewed as closely intertwined, and how the novel's metafictional writing of history represents a cast of traumatised fictional characters whose fragmented relationships, stories and experiences reflect (on) the fragmented process of trauma/witness writing. Milena Marinkova argues that "Ondaatje's words" bear witness to "unwitnessed stories" and "unacknowledged witnesses", becoming an interlinear historiographic act, an intimate gesture ... (108- 109). Accordingly, in order to discuss how *Anil's Ghost* engages in such an ethical act of bearing witness to unwitnessed stories and unacknowledged witnesses in real life, I argue that Ondaatje employs the novel as a functional and fictional material unity. In addition to its representative and fictionalising qualities, the novel is a material object that enjoys a corporeal existence in the world. It is precisely because of its unity as a material object that the novel is able to quilt various stories into one book of related content, allowing us to see various fragmented, corporeal wounds and personal trauma in a way that brings both forms of injury together *without* privilege.

Similarities between *Anil's Ghost* and other Ondaatje works dealing with trauma appear when comparing the narrative archaeology in *Anil's Ghost* to a poem in *Handwriting*, "Buried", which also discloses the trauma and loss of intimacy engendered by civil war: "What we lost. The interior love poem the deeper levels of self landscapes of daily life" (*Handwriting* "Buried" 24 lines 7-9). Similarly, the Author's Notes in *Anil's Ghost* recognise the loss of real lives sourced from an actual list provided by Amnesty International (as displayed on page 41).

By bringing into the open the “novelistic reality” between fact and fiction, text and history, and by inserting the names of real subjects into fiction, this technique not only heightens the novel’s credibility as fiction that reflects real trauma, but foregrounds the lives of the disappeared in order to make visible that which would normally remain undisclosed.

Correspondingly, *Anil’s Ghost* provides a rich evocation of the very real terror that results in the dislocation of an entire nation. The novel explores a “novelistic” reality where, according to Ron Charles, the Sri Lankan population is traumatised by “political terror and hidden crimes” (17). Similarly, Paul Gray argues that characters are trapped in a titanic struggle to retain their humanity and secure a firm grip on reality amid the “pervasive violence of war” (75). While *Anil’s Ghost* is similar to *The English Patient* by virtue of the fact that both novels deal with war, history and forms of dislocation, the latter places characters and history largely off-stage: that is to say, the novel explores private rather than public events and conditions, and shows that the boundary between the two is unstable and permeable.

As response to such terror and dislocation, *Anil’s Ghost* unveils the ethical pressures and responsibilities that arise as inextricable components of the bonds and intimate relationships that we form with others. The syncretic textual representation of such different close relationships under conditions of extreme violence in turn makes the novel’s evocation of material restoration possible. *Anil’s Ghost* is a novel of mystery and detection but it transcends the conventions of the genre. Once the identity of Sailor is reconstructed, Anil proceeds to present her findings to the government, yet is immediately forced to leave the country, with little closure regarding her fate. Ondaatje offers the assertion that “one voice can speak for many” (AG 167). The novel achieves a particular outcome at a metafictional level through characterisations of the outsider and exile as variations of the author-figure – a strategy also employed in *The English Patient* – that offer embodied accounts of self-destruction due to trauma. These fictional characters and the fragmented relationships between them act as the prism through which the novel views various traumatic stories, memories, spaces and injuries, with the corporeal body central in trauma writing.

Because of the absence of any body of representational guidelines to be ethical when writing about an issue as sensitive as trauma, Ondaatje lets the novel’s form display like a wounded body, with a catalogue of physical injuries substituting for the unrepresentable nature of pain. Similarly, because a fragmented body of personal stories displaces the narrative of history as hegemonic meta-narrative, the novel presents the need for various textual fragments to be re-assembled in its place, *performing* the fragmented character of pain and trauma through the body of the text. The author and scholar Amitav Ghosh correspondingly notes how “terror represents an epistemic violence – a radical interruption in the procedures and protocols that give the world a semblance of comprehensibility” (98). Similarly, *Anil’s Ghost* points out that terror destroys the human and humane capacity to put experience into words, severing

understanding while “[t]he most precisely recorded moments of human history lay adjacent to the extreme actions in nature or civilisation” (55).

The juxtaposition of scientific terminology with sensuous prose captures the representative resistance inherent to trauma and its fragmented and discontinuous “order” and “chaos”, ranging across the disciplines of medicine, forensics, anatomy, palaeontology, geography and geology. Similarly, the novel’s fragmented form metafictionally performs the corporeal selflessness of its main characters, where various forms of violence characterise extreme physical damage and debilitating wounds to human bodies from the outside, with various degrees of severity. These devastating forms of violence are presented as random brutality and political attacks; the excision of communal and personal history, one-dimensional notions of truth and knowledge; and concerns relating to insensitive representation.

The novel’s view of dislocation uncovers the war at home and within, a political struggles where characters deal with personal demons while surrounded by “spectres of retaliation” (AG 301). Since “spectres” of disorder and displacement leave characters on the margins of society, the novel unearths fragmented accounts of Anil’s sense of dislocation and memories of her break-up with Cullis, Sarath’s loss of his wife Ravina, Palipana’s reclusive survival, his niece Lakma’s tentative recovery, Gamini’s addiction to amphetamines and loss of his wife through divorce, and Ananda’s alcoholism and attempted suicide.

Consequently, in order to supplement the intimacy that is missing in characters’ lives, Ondaatje’s trauma writing acts as literary “vigil for the dead, these half-revealed forms” (AG 5). Situated between aesthetics and ethics, the novel continues to problematise the project of reconstruction, fully aware of its own status as ethically-imbued literary technology. Although the novel undeniably has a reconstructive dimension, it is also severely cautious regarding the efficacy and ethical integrity of reconstructive practices – this is foregrounded in Anil’s insensitivity regarding the use of Sailor’s reconstructed head; also, the novel tends to steer deliberately clear of sensationalist representation (as in the account of Sirissa’s death). Thus, rather than being an exclusively “reconstructive” text, the novel embraces figurative language to paint a picture of civil war as a “half-revealed form”.

While *Anil’s Ghost* shifts between fragments of shared trauma and individual loss, there is no singular healing, communal space like the Villa San Girolamo in *The English Patient* to offer refuge from destruction and violence. However, the heterotopic space of the Oronsay (I discuss Foucault’s conception of heterotopias at a later stage), and the healing space of The Grove of Ascetics, help characters to enact various material restorations – of their lives, and of their embodied relation to the world and others. Ultimately, to disclose an open-ended form of trauma/witness writing where the fragmented form and content gradually enable a relational symmetry, the individual vignettes in *Anil’s Ghost* resonate as part of a greater



(re)constructive vision on Ondaatje's behalf. By voicing fictional representations of the intimate, local, ethical and communal, the novel concludes with a powerful and commanding material restoration that counters the dislocation of the real Sri Lankan population.

During the novel's *Prologue*, which immediately establishes a focus on trauma, memory and subjective narrative, a miner's folk song juxtaposes recollections of the central character Anil's memories of fieldwork in Guatemala. While Ondaatje writes of the *dead* and *living* in an italicised interlude suggesting distance from conventional representation, Anil meets families haunted by the "double-edged" fear that "bodies may or may not be a son or husband or brother" (6). At "this heterotopic site of postcolonial burial" (Burrows 169), "[t]here are no words... But the grief of love in that shoulder [Anil] will not forget, still remembers" (5-6, italics in original). By disclosing the "grief of love" that must "still be remembered", this emblematic fragment uncovers trauma's attendance on a close connection between forgetting and remembering, and how remembering to forget is essential to work through trauma<sup>5</sup>.

Because *Anil's Ghost* reveals the near-impossibility of remembering without words, it suggests that trauma nonetheless festers like shrapnel inside the body; death is paradoxically omnipresent yet without clear referent, rendered *unlocatable*. The novel's notion of remembering trauma is uncannily similar to Sigmund Freud's conception of traumatic memory as a "memory without words" in *The Making of the Theory: Beyond the Pleasure Principle* published in 1920. By witnessing the trauma of soldiers that returned from World War 1, Freud saw how they would in dreams and memories repeat or re-enact such unsettling events. In his psychoanalytic theory, he argues that the death drive (the "Todestrieb", referred to later by some as "Thanatos", which stands in opposition to the life drive or "Eros") is the manifestation of a physical principle: matter tends towards simpler, more inert forms.

These might include self-destruction and death, or our idea of death, because it is a concept that can only act as a metaphor; it is physically impossible to be alive and describe the experience of death to another corporeal human being. This impossibility of giving death a completely intelligible face through words alone is then exactly what *Anil's Ghost* as archaeological study of forms of death or past life is concerned with: the novel's focus on various forms of death (and life) structures Ondaatje's subsequent argument for the ethical relationships and material forms of restoration that can *tentatively* heal forms of trauma.

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<sup>5</sup> Ondaatje's poetic sensibilities are most visible in the novel's fragments dealing with characters' own traumatic thoughts and memories; it is in the recesses of the private mind that the author paints devastatingly vivid pictures of characters distanced from loved ones and from a safe place in the world.

After the Prologue, we are told of Anil's arrival in Sri Lanka, followed up by another italicised fragment of past violence in the Shanxi province in China. Here, Buddhist cave sculptures are brutally "cut out of the walls with axes and saws" (12), leaving behind "the place of a complete crime" where the incisions are still visible (12). Ondaatje provides no extra-diegetic explanation of this event, adding to the impression that *Anil's Ghost* concerns itself as much with the lack of reason in violence as with disclosing the *nature* of trauma.

At a fundamental level of identity, Anil "knew herself to be, and was known to others as, a determined creature. Her name had not always been Anil. She had been given two entirely inappropriate names and from very early began to desire 'Anil', which was her brother's unused second name" (67). Her intense sense of contentment and determination to maintain her newly adopted name does not diminish over time, as "everything about the name pleased her, its slim, stripped-down quality, its feminine air, even though it was considered a male name. Twenty years later she felt the same about it" (67). This fragment of information tells the reader that she has "swerved" into a new direction in her life, and that she has (re)created an identity for herself similar to the (re)creation of Sailor's identity undertaken with the help of others on the island.

In Ondaatje's "critique of diasporic forms of belonging" (Harting 49), Anil arrives in Sri Lanka after years abroad with "personal wars" raging (9). By continuing the theme of displacement featured in *The English Patient*, the novel shows that while Anil is away from home, she is also *at* home, complicating the role of space and place in determining a sense of being at home<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, while characters study bodies, texts and landscapes, they inhabit different spaces in order to find a kind of asylum (safety from danger, escape and immersion, yet also confinement and a sense of borders). While working abroad, Anil "expect[s] clearly marked roads to the source of most mysteries" (54), with "[t]he journey in getting to the truth", the "same for Colombo as for Troy" (156, 64). As I discuss throughout, Anil pays a great price for her rigid views. Unable to prevent her parents' death, she realises that her archaeological witnessing centres on viewing the lives of others in an ethical and compassionate way: [...] I think how it could be me in the grave I am working on. I would not want somebody to stop digging for me" (34). Whereas Anil continues to "dig" up (what) remains of the dead, Ondaatje's play on the phrase *bringing someone to book* has Anil reading bodies before transcribing empirical judgements.

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<sup>6</sup> In their intimacies with violence and dislocation, both Ondaatje and Anil return to their native homeland after a prolonged absence, (in Anil's case fifteen years and Ondaatje's twenty-five), while their homecomings are neither utopian nor without painful re-membering. While the fictional Anil returns in *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje makes his return to Sri Lanka in his memoir *Running in the Family*.

Trauma scholar Cathy Caruth captures the difficulty of uncovering physical evidence of trauma and emotional abrasions in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. She writes that trauma is the “response to an unexpected or overwhelmingly violent event or events that are *not fully grasped* as they occur”, arguably because “the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it” (91-92). Although Caruth talks about trauma as a “missed encounter”, something that resists being fully understood, Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* adds another dimension to this understanding, making the argument that war, torture and trauma can be seen as an “un-reality” that is unrepresentable through language, most clearly read as a dynamic between the domains of the *Real* and *Symbolic* (Scarry 12). Conversely, the unrepresentability of pain and trauma is something traumatic and unsettling. Ondaatje’s excavation of war’s “interior content” rather than its “unanchored issues” (Scarry 60) is a point he is taken to task for, and is something I explore below.

Scarry argues, in a way analogous to Ondaatje in *Anil’s Ghost*, that severe injuries have the capacity to “mime death” when the body shares traumatic intimacy with violence (5). Akin to the English patient’s “unending ‘death’” where he is forced to carry the scars of history upon his annihilated body, a comparable nervous and traumatic condition is the “scarring psychosis in the country” of Sri Lanka (AG 56). Whereas traumatic un-reality is disclosed ironically through the inability to re-member the material presence of loved ones through language, veiled actions blur the lines between civil society and civil war, where “[t]here’s no hope of affixing blame” (17). By obliterating comprehension and dismantling understanding, physical pain “is not of or for anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language” (Scarry 5). Because of this lack of *referential content*, the words of the “patient, physician, amnesty worker, lawyer, artist” seeking to “reverse the de-objectifying work of pain by forcing pain itself into objectification”, are tasked with exposing the dis-closure that characterises pain (Scarry 6, 13). Consequently, with the fragmented *textual unity* of *Anil’s Ghost* “[miming] death” (Scarry 5), Anil, during her time on the island, sees that “those who were slammed and stained by violence lost the power of language and logic” (55), an epiphany flagging an important moment in the text. This passage anticipates the novel’s excavation of Ananda’s character, one who has been “slammed and stained” by the violence that characterises loss.

The novel consistently discloses ways to “abandon emotion” and “protect” the self through *immersion* (58). Anil recalls the words of soldier poet Archilocus, seeing the *irony* of war: “[I]n the hospitality of war we left them the dead to remember us by” ... (11, italics in original). While this quote recalls Plato’s well-known insight that “Only the dead have seen the end of war”, the ironic hospitality flags the novel’s evocation of the *hospital space* – which I subsequently discuss in relation to Gamini’s character – with the Sri Lankan civil war “civil” in name only. After her recollections of Archilocus’ ironically immortal *words*, which

are part of a body of knowledge “outliving” his corporeal presence, Anil notes how “[in Sri Lanka] there was no such gesture to the families of the dead” (11). With obfuscation of bodily identification and blurred lines between victim and perpetrator, Anil “interprets” Sri Lanka with a “long distance gaze” (11), bearing witness to Sri Lankans trapped in a situation that “makes darkest Greek tragedies innocent [in comparison]” (11).

Ondaatje’s fragmented trauma writing interrupts the *silence* of painfully inexplicable deaths with intermittent *italicised* examples of random brutality. These “vignettes of violence” (Burrows, 170) include the seemingly random killing of a government official on a speeding train (31-32), the assassination of the epigraphist Palipana’s brother Narada (46), Gunesena’s crucifixion (68), or a list of those abducted while living normal lives: “*Kumara Wijatunga. 17. 6<sup>th</sup> November 1989*” (57). These emblematic italicised fragments demonstrate the un-reality of war, silencing of marginal voices, and dislocation of communal and intimate relationships in the novel as a whole. In a telling example, Ondaatje’s dream-like tone conveys the stealthy violence pervading the island: “*He might have been a tableau in someone’s dream. He jerked the official off the ground and pushed him through the opening*” (31).

In its metafictional aspect, the forensic report in *Anil’s Ghost* connects to its notions of witnessing as “last protection for the self” (55). Ondaatje communicates a strong sense of place as form of protection and shelter in the novel by providing brief glimpses into the island’s unique geography and culture. While Anil (un)covers traumatised bodies by remaking them into texts (in a project in service of completeness, clarity and finality), so maps in *Anil’s Ghost* make landscapes over into bodies of text, a point I discuss in some detail in the previous chapter of this dissertation. Maps in *Anil’s Ghost* uncover Sri Lankan mining practices, suggesting that the history and story of the island’s embodied presence as a natural and cultural zone hinges on a palimpsestic overlaying of time and labour. Whereas Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* includes a map of Sri Lanka, *Anil’s Ghost* refuses, the latter literally suggesting a dis-located pattern of death of the island’s history as something that is unrepresentable through visual language. Consequently, the novel supplements such a void by performing a post-mortem of how maps through transcription of natural properties violently inscribe, through a clinical “pen”, a “list” of wounds and excisions on “bone” (AG 64), reducing nature to maps’ “skeletal shape” analogous to the violent processes of inscription in *The English Patient* (18).

Through the representations of the island in the *National Atlas*, the notable absence of human life and excised presence of intersections between nature and culture actively perform the loss of a tangible sense of intimacy, community and familiarity for the local populace. Like trauma, this silences their voices by distancing them from their own country: “The national Atlas of Sri Lanka has seventy-three versions of the island- each template revealing only one aspect, one obsession... No depiction of human life” (39). Just as the novel dis-closes how

texts and landscapes are made analogous through cartographical inscription, Anil constantly studies the body's traumatic inscription before making them over into text. Although the novel continuously links Anil to elements of water and swimming, fire and smoke<sup>7</sup>, she is ironically unable to recognise how discursive borders that frame conventional epistemological practices often determine the location and locatedness of truth. As a result, Anil continuously problematises the lines between nature and culture, life and death, fact and fiction and violence and intimacy in *Anil's Ghost*. It is surprising that Anil has no active intimate relationship in the novel given her history of past relationships, while similarly all of the main characters have intimate relationships remembered only in the past tense. Most intimacies are thus channelled through retrospective memory rather than present activity.

Since "[i]t was while studying at Guy's that Anil found herself in the smoke of one bad marriage" (140), her intimate relationships are characterised by extreme states of being, while forms of unreasonable and self-destructive passion supplement her distinctly temporal consciousness. In a typical example of Anil's (self)destructive passion, her marriage in medical school with a "many-armed seducer" (42) with whom she shares "[d]ays of battle and fuck" (144) ends as she "buries" his presence, while "never replay[ing] any of their days together..." (144). Anil is similarly "dislodged" in her affair with married science writer and author-figure Cullis, with their intimacy – echoing a similar relationship between the English patient and Katherine Clifton – undercutting a sense of mutual integrity and understanding.

After meeting during a scientific convention, the relationship between Anil and Cullis "[is] a long intimacy that had existed mostly in secrecy..." (101), while their interactions are related fragments in the novel's archaeology of forms of death – as science, fact, threat, absence attended by memory and presence deserted by life. While Anil ironically retreats from society to be closer to Cullis, just as Katherine becomes socially reclusive to be with the patient, she "[feels] there was this physical line to him wherever he was on the planet, beyond ocean or storm... tug[ged] clear of branches or rocks deep in the sea..." (102). This embodies a distinctly corporeal intimacy that ironically gestures towards absence and distance, suggested by "ocean" and sea", and the violent potential suggested by "rocks", "storm" and "tug clear".

Subsequently, despite the physical line of separation that often intercedes between them, Anil and Cullis are only able to briefly move beyond a lack of understanding that characterises their affiliation's intimate violence: "[...] [Cullis] would move down the bed... to the cave within her... The precise and inarticulate sounds of each witnessed by the other" (169). Threads of conflicting understanding undo even this fragment of intimate witnessing, where the "precise" and "inarticulate" contrast the close reading of the individual self, "witnessed" yet mis-read by the other. With Anil informing Cullis how the body *speaks* to her while they

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<sup>7</sup> This symbolically links Anil to Sarath, who is linked both to water and swimming and to fire in the novel's cave scenes, and links Anil to Sarath's study of various natural and cultural elements in archaeology.

lie in bed together, she inadvertently divulges how her intimate relationships rely on what can be recorded like a “list of wounds” (*EP* 153). Immersed in the archive of forensic and anthropological history, Anil ‘know[s] the name of several bones in Spanish’ (34).

As a “complete stranger” to her lover, Anil’s desire to “*marry a Tinker*” (37, my emphasis) echoes the novel’s fragmented “vigils for the dead” (5) where Anil and Sarath name one of the skeletons they find *Tinker*, while the fragmented intimacy between Anil and Cullis unravels precisely due to the need for knowledge of other. Consequently, Cullis feels as if he is “encased in ice or metal” (263), and sees as misguided Anil’s “banging on its surface” (263) to “let him out” (263). In their confrontational farewell, while Cullis tries to hold on to Anil and their relationship, she stabs him with a knife: “Remember this... You can make a story out of it” (100-101). This narrative marker shows how *Anil’s Ghost* “makes” fictional stories from material events and conditions that mirror forms of intimate violence in “reality”.

After excavating the indeterminacy and fragmentation of traumatic experience through the early characterisation of Anil and her intimate relationships, Ondaatje presents a kind of author-figure in the science writer Cullis, one who embodies writing as an alchemical, (re)constructive relation to the world. While the English patient rises like a mythical phoenix from a burning plane to return to *The Cave of Swimmers*, Cullis produces scientific texts after a writing process that the novel makes analogous to embodied writing acts of swimming. Whereas the author-figures of Sarath and Palipana archaeologically study past lives and forms of death, Cullis studies scientific phenomena. These characters engage in a distinctly Barthesian reading ethic, actively creating new stories from original texts. Similarly, *Anil’s Ghost* discloses writing as a gradual and corporeal process that links human nature to the natural world, and as a practice that connects to the unconscious desire to disclose what cannot be *told* in a way equivalent to trauma.

Consequently, writing becomes analogous to a “descent” into “darkness” (264), where, to “make” objective “stories”, Cullis “slip[s] into the page as if it were water, and tumbled on. The writer was a tumbler... If not, then a tinker...” (264-5). As another key fragment in the novel and this section that reveals how writing is an alchemical form of self-expression where different textures and elements are experimented with and brought together, Ondaatje makes Cullis as author-figure akin to the English patient, a man described as “a book to be read” (*EP* 243). Moreover, Ondaatje makes Cullis as *tinker* comparable with his own artifice, where he writes apocryphal stories – fictional, mythical, intertextual and story-bound – such as *Anil’s Ghost*, where the trauma of the living and the dead can be disclosed.

By reflecting (on) writing as creative process characterised by the gathering and combination of various elements in novel ways, Cullis’s “materials” is suggested to house different fragments of a larger “identifiable truth” (*AG* 67). The central axis of this “examination”,

while taking place in the emblematic spaces of The Oronsay, The Grove of Ascetics, the hospital and Sri Lankan mountain caves, revolves around Anil as reclusive forensic scientist finding (an) asylum in the lab. Whereas Anil moves between different locations in the novel, she performs her relationship to the West, both her close sense of connection and her feeling of distance. Her archaeology of various forms of death allows for an ironic intimacy with the secluded, sterile lab space. Anil's fear of loss and need to control as many eventualities as possible after her parents die in a car crash is transplanted to her work in the lab: "during autopsies her secret habit of detour is to look for the amygdala, this nerve bundle which governs fear - so it governs everything" (135). The lab space is where Anil finds asylum (protection from danger and a sense of security, yet also a form of confinement), becoming a de-humanised scientific instrument rather than feeling subject: "No hunger or thirst or desire... Just an awareness of someone in the distance hammering a floor, banging through ancient concrete with a mallet as if to reach the truth... These buildings were her home (66).

Since Anil ironically identifies with others that hammer in the distance and bang on walls to reach the truth, just as she hammers to reach Cullis, she finds a home away from home in the lab, where violent close reading ironically performs a dis-closure of truth. Therefore, although the lab offers Anil an escapist "thrill" (34), she metaphorically buries herself away from others, "[falling] in love with her work" (33). This form of immersive burial of the working body and mind into labour anticipates my discussion of other author-figures in the novel – Sarath, Gamini and Ananda – that similarly immerse themselves in work to avoid their own trauma. While Anil is dislocated from communal relations to others and from a personal space to call home, in a manner that recalls the displacement of Hana and Caravaggio in *The English Patient*, she subconsciously performs a search for "truth" even when intimate with Cullis, her "hand moving constantly, as if brushing earth away" (34).

Akin to Ondaatje's role as author throughout the novel where he excavates "patterns of death", Anil as "witness writer" "brushes earth away" in her working life with different forms of art, particularly films and novels (AG 167). Through a recognition of her own voice in other stories in a manner analogous to Hana's close reading of fictional texts in *The English Patient*, Anil realises how innocence and guilt intertwine in real life and in fiction: 'We are often criminals in the eyes of the earth, not only for committing crimes, but because we know that crimes have been committed.' Words about a man forever buried in a prison... *The Man in the Iron Mask* (54). Through Anil's metafictional character that is, like others in the novel, buried in a kind of psychological prison, Ondaatje is thus demonstrating how knowledge is a form of power. I note this important point, made by Foucault, in my discussion of *The English Patient*, while also revisiting it below. Although Anil escapes the rigidity of her lab work when she spends time with her "closest friend and constant companion" (235) Leaf Niedecker – a fellow forensic investigator diagnosed with "early onset Alzheimer's", often unable to remember Anil and their times spent together in an Arizona lab – it is *outside* of the

lab where they are closest. During the time spent dissecting films together – another form of critical reading embodied by Anil – Ondaatje discloses how Anil and Leaf analyse *Point Blank* (1967) by director John Boorman. Anil writes to him concerning the “verisimilitude of a gunshot wound inflicted on the character played by Lee Marvin in the film’s final shootout” (258), exposing her naive belief that facticity guarantees representational veracity, while also linking to my discussion below of the critical response to Ondaatje’s writing of war.

Fittingly, in order to perform the ways Anil engages with the world outside of the lab, *Anil’s Ghost* maps her continuous swimming, suggestive of the mastery of bodily movement but also of an immersion into the subterranean. Since swimming in the novel involves immersion into reflective spaces – authorial, natural or cultural – of fluidity and openness, the body must acclimatise to a new environment and perceptual field. It must also perform its adaptation within its embedded environment. Since Anil’s aptitude for swimming is mentioned repeatedly (10, 16, 47, 67, 249), it connects to her fragmented sense of self (just as the English Patient supplements his life-story with fragments of *The Histories*): “[A] mild celebrity in Colombo because of her swimming, Anil was shy without the presence of her talent.... when she developed her gift for forensic work, she knew one of the advantages was that her skill signalled her existence...” (141). Anil’s swimming is thus not only critical for relation to the world, but grounds the ways in which her mind “swims” around “facts” during her archaeology as forensic scientist. She is therefore characterised as a thinking and rational scientific mind rather than as an emotionally accessible heroine.

The French theorist Maurice Merleau-Ponty is a common point of reference for a loose collection of contemporary theories that insist on the phenomenological importance of the body as the ultimate ground of experience and consciousness. These theories can be termed, for the sake of convenience, “embodiment theory”. The archaeological focus of the novel on forms of death also translates into a focus on forms of living and life, which allows us to turn to this scholarly field to illuminate Ondaatje’s incessant foregrounding of the body as a site of meaning and experience.

In her lucid study of (textual) embodiment Rosochacki argues, “[t]he experience of embodiment in *Anil’s Ghost* is chiefly inflected through the figure of Anil... More than a psychological entity, the figure Anil is shown as sensually perceptive body” (35). This underscores my similar contention that Anil is the novel’s most intuitively embodied character, and by the end of the novel stands out as one of its most sensual characters. With notions of thinking and feeling predicated on the primary ability to perceive the world, Merleau-Ponty argues that the body connects to the objective world: “Inside and outside are inseparable. The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself” (407). As such, embodiment thinking challenges the construction of the body as vessel ‘containing consciousness’, and embodied subjectivity suggests a relational form of



experience/connection drawing no divisions between inner and outer life akin to the novel's form and content. Consciousness in *Anil's Ghost* is thus both bodily incarnate and inhering in the world.

To return to Anil's immersion into different environments, she remains grounded in spaces where she is able to recognise patterns of death: "In some ways her later obsessive tunnelling toward discovery was similar to that underwater world (69). Resembling the "peering through time" (69), this "obsessive" need for discovery both links Anil to Cullis and unveils how Ondaatje "tunnels" through aesthetic and ethical trauma/witness writing. Subsequently, with The Grove of Ascetics as a healing space allowing Anil to (re)connect to the world, lines between the natural and cultural disappear. Embodiment scholar Monika Langer succinctly describes Merleau-Ponty's understanding of this boundary-crossing relation:

[...] A fundamental ambiguity distinguishes human life from animal life...[E]verything in the former is simultaneously 'natural' and 'cultural' - nothing is absolutely independent of 'purely biological being,' yet everything transcends it. (62)

Thus, during her time spent with Palipana and his niece Lakma, Anil performs a physical and textual appreciation of Merleau-Ponty's contention that perception through the body is both the end and the means of an embodied subjectivity. I discuss Palipana's embodied subjectivity below. While learning to embrace the local as source of intimacy, "[i]t is in The Grove of Ascetics... that Anil learns to see and hear locally" (Farrier 87). In a small yet significant gesture revealing her subjectivity as embodied, Anil bathes in a well as a kind of baptism after trauma. In this fragment that informs the reader of Anil's status as sensually perceptive body, she sees how bathing, like swimming, is a form of immersion that brings body and mind together seamlessly while combining "sparse necessity and luxury" (69).

Juxtaposing fragments of Anil's Sri Lankan history as *swimming subject* and time spent with Palipana and Lakma at *The Grove of Ascetics* is Ondaatje's fictional yet true-to-life story of Linus Corea, a "neurosurgeon in the private sector" "invisible to those that do not matter to him"(120). After a group of militants abduct Corea in order for him to operate on the sick and wounded, they separate him from his private practice and make him work in excess of twelve hours a day. Subsequently, from a state of dislocation, Corea ironically swims in the mainstream of life again as part of a wounded yet tentative community. The above arguments concerning trauma, the body and embodiment thus not only serve to foreground the centrality of the body in traumatic forms of death and experiences of life, but emphasise how the nature of experience and perception is one that is distinctly embodied and embedded/relational. Because texts are read as bodies and bodies read as texts in *Anil's Ghost*, the novel uncovers a representation of trauma that shows how trauma obliterates language and representation, yet creates the grounds that bring corporeal bodies in close relation. In the following section, I

demonstrate how space and place function as interconnective, propinquitous sites in *Anil's Ghost*, where Foucault's influence on Ondaatje's writing appears to be patent.

In contrast to *The Grove of Ascetics*, Foucault's conception of "heterotopias" or "other spaces" find reflection in the novel's reflective, immersive space of the Oronsay, where Anil and Sarath seek to disclose the identities of the four skeletons. "Heterotopia" derives from the Latin translating literally as a "place of otherness": in Foucauldian terms, "Of Other spaces/ *Des espaces autres*" (22-27). By supporting border-crossings like the novel's fragmented form and content, order in these spaces is ruptured while a new order is set into motion, with one space only "other" when compared to another. Primarily concerned with spatial configurations, by destabilizing established spaces, heterotopias are counter-spaces producing counter-narratives, crossing boundaries to disrupt how knowledge and power function.

The abandoned cruise liner the Oronsay had "once travelled between Asia and England" (18). As Anil and Sarath's new *communal* space of work, the Oronsay reads as "other space," a physical carrier harnessing bodies of knowledge and corporeal bodies like the dead Sailor. Consequently, while docking in various harbours and becoming a part of the land (and sea) by moving between different spaces – like the novel's form and content – the Oronsay as (counter)location transforms into a communal vestige of boundary-crossing inter-relation, reminiscent of *The English Patient's* Villa San Girolamo: "The grand ship had now become essentially part of the land... A section of the transformed liner was to be Sarath and Anil's base" (18). Subsequently, *Anil's Ghost* illustrates how Anil and Sarath, and its own fragmented narrative, temporarily and temporally find a port of call at the unused passenger liner. The travelling material and epistemological vessel – reminiscent of the patient's copy of *The Histories* and Ondaatje's other novels – houses a similar body of travelling knowledge through the body of Sailor, in turn "inscribed" with meaning in a way analogous to the inscription of the patient's body. In order to bear witness to violence and trauma, Anil writes her forensic report on the death of those like Sailor at the Oronsay. Close to the end of the narrative, Sailor's "rescued" bones are referred to as "struts on a boat" (284), linking Sailor to the English patient's rescue from imminent death by the Bedouin, who carry him upon a boat of "palanquin and felt" (EP 9). This also links the forensic report of Sailor's death to *other* forensic reports, and emblematises the novel's insistence that one voice can speak for many.

With the Oronsay as literal and literary meeting point between ontological and epistemological worlds and the East and West, in a way that complements its suggestion of a hybrid and open-ended form of knowledge and truth, Anil and Sarath learn about each other and their different ways of seeing and knowing. To create a central tension in the novel's archaeology of different voices and stories regarding the "making" of meaning and truth, Anil's Western *positivist epistemology* contrasts the less rigid categorisation of truth by Sri Lankan scholars Sarath and Palipana. Redolent of the literal gulf between East and West, the

distance between Anil and Sarath and Palipana concerns contrasting ways of approaching knowledge and truth. *Anil's Ghost*, similarly to *The English Patient*, underscores Foucault's *inversion* of notions that those in powerful positions determine truth and knowledge: "[O]urs is a society which produces and circulates discourse with a truth function, discourse which passes for the truth and holds specific powers" (*History of Sexuality* 67).

Foucault argues that the empiricist discourse of "truth" (rooted in Enlightenment philosophy) produces power in society, and that truth holds power in discourse, instead of the powerful deciding what is true. Ondaatje arguably seems to agree, employing Sarath and Palipana as author-figures in the novel, where Sarath – in a manner reminiscent of the narrative function of the character of the English patient – and as a fragment of a larger story is eventually laid to rest as "ghost" that watches over the novel's other characters. As a result, through the close reading of the four skeletons by Anil and Sarath at the Oronsay, *Anil's Ghost* exposes the fractured relationship between bodies and texts emblematic of the fragmented intimacy between characters in the novel as a whole: 'Use that pen and move it along the bone. That way you can see the twist in the bone clearly' (51). Similarly, Ondaatje's novel performs a textual philosophy of trauma writing and embodiment that discloses how "pens" can write about "bones", that is to say about traumatised bodies and minds.

Just as the blind epigraphist Palipana creatively blends the natural and cultural (I discuss his character below), Sarath's "treatment" of the four skeletons highlights the novel's dexterity in bringing violence and intimacy, and brutality and beauty, together seamlessly and sensuously: "[He] began cleaning the bones of the first skeleton, drilling free the fragments of dirt. Then he turned on a slim hose and let it hover over each bone, air nestling into the evidence of trauma..." (54). This illuminating passage is illustrative of the novel as a whole, where, through Ondaatje's inspired representative defamiliarisation regarding violence and intimacy, dislocated "fragments of dirt" paradoxically elucidate traumatic "evidence".

Although Sarath and Anil use "bones" to disclose "bodies" of truth, the subjective nature of knowledge and truth is symbolised by the novel's following phrase representative of *Anil's Ghost* as a whole: 'Most of the time in our world, truth is just opinion' (102). Sarath demands recognition of the "archaeological surround of a fact" (42), recalling Foucault's idea of the "archaeology of knowledge" (*Archaeology of Knowledge* 130). This archaeology acts to circulate clusters of expression and opinion (discourse) that form an opaque, contested network, in turn informing how the transmission and understanding of knowledge enters society. These forms of expression enter a greater sphere informing archaeological intent, which Foucault names the *archive*. While Anil focuses on rational and empirical verification of *observable phenomena*, Sarath seeks to understand how Anil's views function in the "general system of the formation and transformation of statements" (*Archaeology of Knowledge* 130) constitutive of the archive of the time.

The novel's understanding of truth as conditional and discontinuous, demonstrated by Sarath, undermines the desire to find a universal "truth". Sarath acts as Ondaatje's mouthpiece when explaining the danger of applying universal truths to unique circumstances, and underscores the "vengeance and slaughter" potentially resulting from "handing truth to an unsafe city around you" (157). The novel similarly shows how the failure to distinguish between different truths results in dislocation and even death, evident in the ironic death of the torchbearers of the view of truth as conditional and discontinuous, Sarath and Palipana. Both Sarath and Palipana undermine the power of the Sri Lankan government by living out their own embodied form of truth (in their work), while both characters ultimately die for their ideals. These characters seem unwilling to bow down to the "truth of their times", rooted in discourse. On a similar level, because Anil's evidence at the novel's end casts suspicion on the government involvement in the killings of Sailor and the three other skeletons, they order her to leave immediately, after confiscating her evidence, clearly recognised as threatening and therefore ironically afforded no truth-function. Whereas Ondaatje thus deconstructs hegemonic notions of truth, the novel nevertheless suggests that Anil's evidence presented at the novel's end arguably has higher status than the government's "truth" regarding the killings.

Analogous to the constant tension between the worldviews of Anil and Sarath, Sarath's life-story gradually reveals a solitary man *all at sea* in the social world. Sarath "[is] high up in the state sponsored archaeological department" (28), as solitary author-figure (akin to Ondaatje) "used to cuneiform, faded texts in stone" (27). By embodying "somehow the link between the mortality of flesh and bone and the immortality of an image or rock" (278-279), Sarath believes that "[a] good archaeologist can read a bucket of soil as if it were a complex historical novel" (151). It seems strangely apt that Sarath should lose his life in the novel, immortalised, albeit as a form of death and ghost, in the novel's pages. By recognising the ethical connections forged under the domain of the aesthetic, Sarath acts as the bridge between Sailor and Anil, placing aesthetics, history and the study of past lives "in the same landscape" (191). While able to unearth various artefacts, Sarath never understands his fragmented relationship with his wife: "Their life remained buried..." (279). Unable to "step back from the trauma of that place" (179), Sarath "disappear[s] [into] darkness" (278).

Due to the novel's focus on the personal rather than political nature of traumatic experience, textual fragments dealing with Sarath place great emphasis on the the tragic knowledge that the recognition of trauma is entirely insufficient to address its pervasive reach. Ondaatje shows how trauma not only isolates and dis-locates individuals, but forces those ensnared to find ways of coping that often lead to further trauma. These levels of separation then function as the paradoxical grounds enabling various intimacies that heal wounds and wounded spirits.

Ondaatje incorporates the biblical image of the literal and figurative burning bush “illuminat[ing] the cave” (156) Sarath visits with Palipana. Through Sarath’s gaze upon cave art, emblematic of the novel’s gathering of fragments, a burning vision of propinquity discloses a revelation of the island, with “war having gone that far up the bloodstream of the island could not get out” (156). Like his brother Gamini, whom I discuss as character below, Sarath is comforted by the single line of maternal caress, depicting woman’s back bent over a child on a “rock carving from another century” that harnesses “[a]ll the gestures of motherhood” (157). The cave paintings Sarath gazes upon symbolically and thematically link Anil’s *Ghost* as metafictional trauma writing with *The English Patient* as *similar* form of historical writing. In both novels, representations of fire suggest a dialectical relation between traumatic violence and aesthetic beauty, between the consummation of life through the body and the (memory of) burning passion that opposes “rational” bodies of knowledge.

The cave visited by Sarath is, in a way analogous to *The Cave of Swimmers* in *The English Patient*, a communal and symbolic landscape suggestive of intimate caress and awareness. It is redolent of the fragmented healing and intimate connection that takes place among mythical surroundings between the English patient and Katherine Clifton in *The English Patient*. Represented as a sacred feminine space, maternal through its protection and regeneration of life from outside society, the cave is much like *The Grove of Ascetics* in its healing potential. By exposing the sustenance of a glowing fire through the presence of the “burning bush”, and by revealing the “truth” that knowledge is no guarantee of asylum, the engravings in the cave denote a permanence that Sarath lacks in his relationships.

With the aesthetic domain offering fragmented respite from terror and trauma – yet reflecting on these concerns – the narrative fragments that relate Sarath’s time in the cave mirror Kip’s time spent with “timeless” statues (*EP* 268), while a *contained* fire in the cave suggests that private fires and public flames are doused when separation is undesirable. With the body playing a central role in the novel as site of power-knowledge, it is increasingly evident that the novel places a considerable amount of currency in the body as innermost textual presence, a presence that despite the absence of memory and story is able to connect other corporeal bodies. Therefore, in order to depict such a recognition of a shared fate and humanity (ultimately by Anil), the novel through the figures of Sarath, Palipana, Gamini and Ananda points toward the local and intimate as repositories of re-connection and (re)construction.

I employ the novel’s plot to “march in time” with my characterisation of Palipana below, as Anil and Sarath must travel to Palipana in *The Grove of Ascetics* in the next step towards disclosing Sailor’s identity. Many critics have read Palipana as a creative historian, romantic archaeologist and author-figure who, like Ondaatje, breaks boundaries between nature and

culture, personal story and public history<sup>8</sup>. As reclusive scholar and epigraphist, Palipana emblematises the novel's disclosure of the outsider and exile as marginal figures able to gather fragments of history and personal stories into a whole more than the sum of fragmented parts. Palipana withdraws from society after gunmen assassinate his brother Narada: "[My brother] escaped the world and the world came after him" (103). In his quest for "new" forms of *knowledge*, Palipana was "for a number of years at the centre of a nationalistic group that eventually wrestled archaeological authority in Sri Lanka away from the Europeans" (74). To create his own view of the past and of history much like Ondaatje, an awareness of local artistry moderates Palipana's positivist epistemology.

Palipana's imaginative gathering of historical and archaeological stories represents an attempt to suggest a fantastic whole, performing a kind of coalescence between nature and culture through the triptych of history, archaeology and autobiography: "History was ever-present around him... It appeared he could divine a thesis at any sacred forest" (79). This coalescent triptych forged by Palipana is a fragment also representative of this dissertation as a whole, where I ultimately argue that Ondaatje employs the novel's unique ability to cross boundaries, in each chapter exploring a particular novel's form and content. I contend that Ondaatje first writes about history in *The English Patient*, then writes about archaeology and trauma in *Anil's Ghost*, and that he meditates on forms of autobiography in *Divisadero*.

Through Ondaatje's inclusion of various fictional characters performing the role of the author-figure, I contend that his writings perform the palimpsestic overlaying of superordinate ideas in service of a metafictional, personal history allowing various marginal voices and unrecorded stories to be heard. At the same time, Ondaatje is (like Palipana) "able to divine an [aesthetic and ethical] thesis", emphasising an *individual* aesthetics and ethics that "reconstructs eras simply by looking at runes" (96) and quilting different stories to expose the impossibility of full disclosure. With "pragmatic awareness" (82) Palipana like Sarath studies history "as if it were a body" (193). History is thus not displaced from consciousness or learning but woven as a kind of textual element into the novel. Palipana performs the "unprovable truth" of aesthetic and ethical trauma/witness writing in *Anil's Ghost*: "[T]he patterns that emerged for Palipana had begun to coalesce. They linked hands...And so the unprovable truth emerged" (82). The novel similarly demonstrates how all history becomes a body of text, uniting factual and imagined texts through forms of writing made possible through the central corporeal presence of the body.

By going against waves of procedural codes, Palipana reads the discontinuous book of the earth, desiring, like the English patient's vision of "a world without maps" (*EP* 248), a world without boundaries between knowledge and truth. Palipana attempts to "divine a thesis" that

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<sup>8</sup>In its desire to erase divisions between categories and characters, the novel is decidedly not a "romance of the archives" like A.S Byatt's *Possession* (Scanlan 309).

will immortalise his study of the natural world, translating “a linguistic subtext that explained the political ties and royal eddies of the island during the sixth century” (81). These discoveries cannot be verified empirically, and his gesture is seen as a betrayal: “[T]here was no real evidence for the existence of these texts. They were a fiction ...” (81) Palipana’s imaginative historical writing stands accused of “crimes of laxness and inaccuracy” (82), mirroring the criticism of political irresponsibility levelled against Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*, a point I take up below. While sympathetic towards Palipana, Ondaatje recognises that the choice to “escape” from reality in “fiction” can literally translate into blindness, as Palipana loses his sight in the novel. Conversely, confronting various forms of death can also lead to traumatic dislocation, as I discuss below when dealing with the character of Gamini. Clearly metafictional, the novel ultimately renders the closely interrelated categories of truth and knowledge contingent, provisional and ethically tied to individual choice.

Akin to the “flame against a sleeping lake of petrol” (156) Sarath warns Anil about when they discuss the “incorrect” appropriation of “truth”, Ondaatje’s archaeological alchemy necessitates a sensitive (re)reading to acknowledge its ethical aesthetics<sup>9</sup>. John Kertzer argues: “Ondaatje... dares to imagine a poetic fusion of words and things so intense that language overcomes its mediating function and directly bodies from the world” (Kertzer 122). This assertion underlines how Ondaatje through Palipana delivers a textual representation of the embodied status of the natural world and the capacity for healing encapsulated in creative language. This assertion underscores how fictional relationships in *Anil’s Ghost* reflect intimacy between real corporeal bodies. The aforementioned romantic merging of words and things emerges in The Grove of Ascetics when water and rock combine. Correspondingly, Palipana’s blind alchemy teaches Lakma to “dislodge” from her damaged life after witnessing her parents’ murder: “She had wanted nothing more to invade her” (103). Subsequently, Palipana’s words form a “cut alphabet” for Lakma, where her *silent* witnessing immortalises Palipana by carving “one of his phrases [into rock]... ” (107)

Because of Ondaatje’s aesthetic and ultimately ethical imperative, I now present the argument that material forms of restoration are able to act as intimate caress serving to address violence and trauma. Because acts of violence deeply traumatise bodies and minds, Ondaatje seeks to address such forms of injury by writing back to the source of pain and displacement, the violent behaviour of those that cause harm to others. By showcasing how bodies can be injured but how they are also material carriers of the physical ability to interact with others in an ethical fashion, Ondaatje uses the aesthetic platform of the novel’s form and content to disclose how forms of violence paradoxically open the door for behaviour that is sensitive, compassionate and intimate. This helps readers to grasp how the novel’s ethical practice is embedded in its aesthetic textual performance of ideas.

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<sup>9</sup> It has already implicitly been argued that *Anil’s Ghost* seeks to eliminate “borders and categories” between the material and the immaterial, text and world, art and life, mind and body.

In the text's fragmented interconnection of violence and intimacy, instead of reading about torturers committing violent acts we are presented with terror victims, touched by their stories and words. Because the novel discloses that "the reason for war was war" (43), this assertion performs the novel's view that war is a law unto itself, without reason or sense. Consequently, the fragmented yet consistent pattern of form and content in *Anil's Ghost* is the textual performance of such a form of disclosure, "revealing that death without pattern – without justification or value – is the real trauma of political brutality" (Kertzer 127). It is therefore unsurprising that Anil and Sarath – while travelling between locations to unravel Sailor's identity – witness the random, horrific evidence of a truck driver crucified to the roadside.

Gunesena's crucifixion is a relational fragment exposing the novel's characterisation of intimate violence. As a result, with the novel's linking of random violence and terror with biblical resonance in the aforementioned textual fragment, *Anil's Ghost* subverts Christian symbolism to provide a shocking example of random suffering that is without a grand purpose or redemptive function. Gunesena's crucifixion is thus a moment that flags the novel's fictional status, where its trauma/witness writing attains a quasi-religious importance for its readers. Similarly, Gunesena's immense suffering links to the similarly violent apocryphal stories of Caravaggio whose thumbs were amputated and the titular patient whose body is annihilated by fire in *The English Patient*, Billy's obsession with *fingers* in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, and Buddy Bolden's "suicide of the hands" in *Coming Through Slaughter* (49). While we read their quasi-religious suffering, we witness the perversely intimate violence that dismantles human bodies and humanity.

Before his death close to the end of the novel, Sarath informs Anil that while '[s]ome people let their ghosts die, others don't' (53). Therefore, by desiring to uncover the spectral patterns of connection in various forms of death, Anil must "find a story somewhere" (180) that will allow for reconstruction of Sailor's life-story: "So we have a story about him, you see. A man who was active, an acrobat almost, then he was injured and had to work in a mine" (180). While this passage not only evokes the *epigraph* concerning *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* ("not a story through their eyes then...") I use to frame my discussion of *The English Patient* as apocryphal story, *Anil's Ghost* embodies through the miner and artisan Ananda and doctor Gamini its ultimate vision of ethical relationships and (re)constructive material restoration that can bring Sri Lankans together through one shared fate.

In Ondaatje's labour of love to the city of Toronto, *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), he focuses on the working body and dis-location of characters like Patrick Lewis and David Caravaggio who precede Ondaatje's excavation of similarly displaced subjects and author-figures like Ananda and Gamini. As another variation of the author-figure in *Anil's Ghost*, Ananda's "archaeological" knowledge is of transience and human frailty, embodied in the absence of intimacy and marriage and the ironic presence of death after his wife Sirissa's disappearance.



On a related note, the novel's textual embodiment of trauma reflects (upon) memories of the absent yet omnipresent present dead. Reminiscent of the Prologue's Guatemalan woman, Ananda is similarly unsure when searching for Sirissa, but never finding her (story).

Ananda is reminiscent of Sarath and particularly Palipana in his reverential performance of local customs and rituals, which reflect in his own work as a gem-pit miner. When discussing the relationship between the body, history and power which Ananda demonstrates in *Anil's Ghost*, Foucault states that "the body is moulded by a great many distinct regimes; it is broken down by the rhythms of work, rest and holidays; it is poisoned by food and values, through eating habits or moral laws; it constructs resistances" ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" 153). This assertion discloses how myriad forms of violence subject the body to external and internal pressures. Concomitantly, the labours of mineworkers like Ananda leaves the "markers of occupation" (166) forensic scientists like Anil decipher. While *Anil's Ghost* establishes this fragmented connection between Ananda and Anil, Foucault's determinist notion of the imprint of history is apparent in *The English Patient* where Caravaggio is scarred by state technologies. Conversely, while mineworkers like Ananda excavate raw materials, their bodies form sites of resistance in a way parallel to how Caravaggio's body survives torture<sup>10</sup>. This in turn mirrors how the gaze in *The English Patient* is reversed from positions of male authority to include female perspectives, while the resistance shown by subaltern bodies like Ananda's show how *Anil's Ghost* amplifies marginalised voices.

Through the process of (re)constructing Sailor's submerged and subterranean story (and stories of the other skeletons and the dead), Ananda's (re)constructive labour offers an immersive escape from the trauma of his wife's disappearance. I note below that criticism of *Anil's Ghost* focuses on its refusal to take sides and apparent lack of facticity. I argue the novel's ethical relation and material restoration provide sufficient rebuttal of these claims. By making sense of trauma through individual suffering, in telling the story of Sirissa, for instance, Ondaatje addresses the personal nature of war and offers a sensitive recognition of individual humanity through intimate witnessing. In a characteristic *italicised* passage depicting Ananda and Sirissa's intimate relationship, Ondaatje sketches a poignant rendition of everyday *life* on the island in a time of *war* (ironically rendered un-real) through Sirissa's simple routine: "*During the government curfews she remained indoors... She would have preferred to walk in the streets after dinner... It was her favourite time...*" (173, italics in original). While showing how trauma obliterates rather than "putting away" senses "one by one" (173), *Anil's Ghost* discloses how violence literally destroys the local, sacred, intimate and historical. With none of the natural, material nor historical safe, intimate witnessing in the novel relates fragmented forms of death in *italics*, as mentioned earlier.

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<sup>10</sup> By leaving his own mark on society in his later work as artificer, Ananda is exalted by his creative labours. He is aware of the legacy his own creative capabilities will leave while engaging in constructive creation involving mental and manual skill, strength and dedication.

As these stories connect through recorded (re)actions, Ondaatje grounds all the italicised pieces in the material world of perception – what can be seen, heard, lived, replayed in the mind’s eye. By working with Sarath, Anil’s need for order is circumnavigated when witnessing Ananda’s ongoing trauma after Sirissa goes missing. Both Anil and Ananda engage in an ethical (re)construction of life rather than death with Ananda’s reconstruction of Sailor’s identity. By finally embracing an intimacy with the local, Anil approaches Ananda after calculating through his bodily features and injuries what kind of labour Sailor would have done. In order to make sense of death, its surroundings, precedents and antecedents, Ananda’s archaeology returns to the Sailor’s previous patterns of human life. When sitting by a public well in the village where Sailor once lived, he “watche[s] the village move around him with its distinct behaviour, its local body postures and facial characteristics” (167).

With Ananda’s (re)construction mediating between forms of death and life, akin to the novel’s witness writing, he leads Anil to touch the muscles on Sailor’s leg, a *fragment* of insight allowing for the (re)construction of gempit-miner Ruwan Kumara’s life *before* death. Consequently, Ananda’s efforts reflect Ondaatje’s metafictional archaeology of the ways in which the narrative craft of fictional stories reflect the real world and the human subjects he uncovers. Like the drafting of a novel, Ananda’s re-creation of patterns of life embodies an intimate knowledge of the fragmented, palimpsestic relationship between form and content:

In the afternoons when Ananda could go no further with the skull’s recreation, he took it all apart, breaking up the clay... [E]arly the next morning he would know the precise thickness and texture to return to and could recreate the previous day’s work in twenty minutes. (171)

Through the desire to overcome the physical and epistemic violence of trauma, Ananda’s creative work ironically reveals not a replica of Ruwan Kumara’s face, but that of Ananda’s beloved Sirissa, with “serenity” (183) filtered through a material restoration after extreme violence. After witnessing Ananda’s sorrow, “Anil put out her hand and touched his forearm...” (171), while some time later, Ananda’s “tenderness” (187) similarly comforts Anil. Reminded of the frail presence yet also absence of Sirissa’s life, Ananda attempts suicide. Literally beside themselves, Anil is “citizenized” by the “friendship” of Sarath “while a stranger attempt[s] to save Ananda” (200). By exposing how trauma paradoxically establishes communal forms of ethical relations, this passage evokes how both friends and strangers can effect forms of material restoration like the reparation of Ananda’s wounds.

After Ananda’s attempted suicide, Anil has a watershed moment. By recalling the mythical boat of death ferrying the dead to the underworld, Ondaatje foreshadows how the dead Sarath will forever remain Anil’s ghost: “She knows there will never be a boat to reach Sarath...” (204). To ultimately understand what Sarath seeks to teach her, Anil is – reminiscent of the English patient who only sees how he has damaged Katherine after her death – only able to

understand Sarath's life-lessons after his murder by the state. While Sarath at a hearing publicly discredits and dismisses Anil's claims of state involvement in the four murders that he and Anil investigate – ironically allowing her to complete her learning on the island – Anil learns how to listen to that which is implicit and hidden within the whisper. By complementing Lakma's earlier intimate witnessing of Palipana's story through listening, Anil's desire to grasp Sarath's subjectivity is implicit in the following assertion by Burrows:

Central to Anil's cultural relearning is the interlinked concept of whispering and the need to listen. In the novel, whispering variously symbolises a dangerous way of spreading illegal or secret knowledge about who the enemy is or might be; a form of intimacy; and, finally, a hesitant way of beginning to work through personal and cultural buried histories ... (172)

Since whispering and listening conjoin the novel's focus on trauma, truth, knowledge, intimacy, archaeology and history, they embody how the novel functions as metafictional history and trauma/witness writing that "narrativises traumas through the medium of words and bodies" (Burrows 172). A whisper also works only if there is a body who whispers, or at least an actual voice, while a listening body is also essential for a whisper to take place. Unlike a body, a written text *cannot* whisper, and it is more difficult to perceive and acknowledge a change in tone or emotional qualities in writing as opposed to voices speaking through the body. Therefore, with hushed and plaintive tones rather than histrionics, *Anil's Ghost* is finally able to disclose the role of the public health care professionals like doctors and nurses that care for the sick, wounded and dying, and the artists and artisans that effect material restorations, emblematic of the novel's larger project to (re)construct from fragments an aesthetic and ethical representation of the Sri Lankan civil war.

Whereas Ondaatje suggests that whispering figures as point of entry to listen to the others' story, Sarath before his murder seeks to understand how Sailor became a part of war. His own death reverses this situation, and the novel discloses how Sarath's death speaks intensely to Anil. The novel makes listening analogous to the bodily perception of outside stimuli, just as listening involves the body's ability to perceive and contextualise stories in order to make sense of them. In one of the novel's elegiac climactic moments, before Anil presents her evidence to the Sri Lankan government, the dead Sarath literally speaks to Anil in a cadaver language captured on a tape recorder. Anil "*listens and re-listens* to the past and what will become a fearful, traumatic memory housed in her own amygdala" (Burrows 174).

This speaking of the dead, the witnessing of deceased bodies, and listening to their voices embodies how the novel brings various forms of death in close relation as texts to be read, *fleshing out* forms of ethical and intimate witnessing. *Anil's Ghost* suggests how texts are constantly re-read, re-written and re-contextualised, disclosing the distinctly corporeal nature of bodies, housing meaning and knowledge for a limited period before inevitable death.

Ondaatje suggests that through forms of ethical relation and care for the body, a material restoration is affected, making the body over into a continuous present and presence through the aesthetic domain. By commemorating Sarath's death, *Anil's Ghost* allows for an ultimately ethical reading of its metafictional history and trauma/witness writing, disclosed through Ondaatje's representation of Sarath's brother, Gamini, as a man whose dis-location as doctor and unsettled status leave him more dead than alive. In fragmented passages reflecting Gamini's private and public self-destruction – mirroring the concurrent devastation of the island's population – Ondaatje unearths how bodily violations echo emotional abrasions that “mimic death” (Scarry 5): “Everyone was emotionally shattered by a public bomb... [W]hat did harm was the emotional shock” (126).

Gamini is a wounded, nomadic doctor and author-figure similar to *The English Patient's* Caravaggio, who is also literally and figuratively swathed in darkness. As an isolated subaltern subject desiring restful sleep recalling the character of Kip, Gamini works particularly exhausting shifts, while “[i]t seemed he did not approach people unless they had a wound” (211). Gamini is more intimate with strangers than with his own family and brother, surrounded by the textual embodiment of death in books' equally fragile pages, echoing Sarath's immersion into archaeology. To prolong the life-stories of others amid violent patterns of death, Gamini surrounds himself with the “truth of their times” (116): “After two weeks of fifteen-hour days they no longer needed assistance from books and moved with ease alongside wounds and suture techniques. But the medical texts remained, for future doctors in training” (116).

Through the demonstration of the ways in which bodies and texts are analogous material carriers of knowledge and life, Gamini finds asylum in hospital spaces similar to the lab for Anil. As a “stranger”, Gamini is “invisible to those around him” (247) while an ironic “state of grace” (225) renders him invisible (225). By providing an ironic sense of asylum for Gamini as it does for Anil, the novel uncovers the difficulty of walking away from trauma, how it produces its own inimical, distorted martial law and language: “A person will walk through a hundred doors to carry out the whims of the dead, not realizing he is burying himself away from the others” (58). While “carrying out the whims of the dead” and “burying himself away”, Gamini confronts his “offstage battle with the war” (209) on his own: “[W]hat he was able to do in the hospital was his only societal value. It was where he met his fate” (209). While Gamini “meets his fate” at emergency rooms, his wife Chrishanti deserts their marriage. In the aftermath of this personal disaster, in states of requiem – sleeping while awake and seemingly sleeping in a wake – Gamini loses a sense of connection to the world, hoarding lifebuoy soap and showering three times a day (209).

A “perfect participant in the war” (223), Gamini swims on a beach late at night before being met by guerrillas, establishing a level of swimming connection between Gamini, Sarath, Anil and Cullis. By refusing to condemn the actions of any party, Gamini orders for food for the guerrillas on his own expense and treats their wounded, cultivating a spirit of hope amid pervasive destruction. Gamini’s refusal to assign blame is also reflective of Ondaatje’s own refusal to point fingers. In disillusioned states of dislocation, his addiction analogous to the wounded English patient’s addiction to morphine, Gamini regresses to a child-like state. Invisibly wounded by the shrapnel of interpersonal relationships, Gamini sleeps in the hospital’s parental wards, in need of “order” in a time of chaos (119). Consequently, like the “sexuality of care” between the English patient and Hana in *The English Patient*, Gamini walks corridors of despair pathetically, “believ[ing] only in the mothers sleeping against their children, the great sexuality of spirit in them...” (119). Similarly, Gamini refuses to place faith in political action or just causes (119), unable to make sense of war: “Who sent a thirteen-year-old to fight, and for what furious cause?” (220). Gamini subsequently discloses how the anachronism of war like an incurable virus metaphorically but also quite literally transforms Sri Lanka into an anachronistic and antiquated “medieval village” (243).

Whereas Sarath remains unaware of his brother’s affection for his wife, Gamini is “injured” by harbouring a secret desire for Ravina<sup>11</sup>. One of the novel’s most tragic examples of dislocation in personal relationships is the exposition of a dysfunctional, unhealthy relationship between Gamini and Sarath. When Anil meets Gamini for the first time (in the presence of Sarath), there is no sign of physical acknowledgement between them: “There had been no touching between him and Sarath, not a handshake” (129). While the novel evokes its characters’ different forms of love and secret desire, Burrows argues that the witnessing of others is paradoxically a redemptive self-recognition: “No one in the novel is healed by their own words... only through the recognition of the other” (165). Consequently, the novel’s aesthetic storytelling demonstrates how the face-to-face encounter makes *each* person sacred.

The body as material vessel in need of physical care is thus also the vehicle that enables the spiritual sutures of trauma and dislocation victims of violence seek. Tragically, Gamini’s earlier statement that “we all have blood on our clothes” (48) finds awful currency in Ravina’s suicide and the death of Sarath. As Gamini recognises his estranged brother’s body, the wretched recognition recalls Hana’s knowledge that nothing can reverse Patrick’s death by fire. Although incredibly difficult, Gamini reaches out to Sarath in death, commemorating his body by re-enacting a “pieta between brothers” (287), both a duty and labour of love that keeps his love for Sarath burning bright: “He could heal his brother... [A]s if treating the hundred small traumas would eventually bring him back into his life...” (287).

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<sup>11</sup>The novel form and guise of the author-figure offers the writer a similar form of escapism with which to expose his ideas to the world, an idea I explore in the next chapter dealing with *Divisadero*.

Paradoxically, Sarath's broken body creates a "permanent conversation" between brothers. In *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje declares, "[w]ords such as *love, passion, duty*, are so continually used they grow to have no meaning - except as coins or weapons" (179, my emphasis). However, in such a moment of extreme bodily violation, "love", "passion" and "duty" become the most pressing responses to trauma, the "coins or weapons" that materialise an ethical currency of looking after the other. This material rejoinder then becomes analogous to the role of the author as an intimately connected outsider and mediator between texts and bodies that "keep[s] peace with enemy camps, eliminate[s] the chaos" (179), stitching the sutures of "micro-political affect" (Marinkova 119).

In the ritualistic material restoration of Sarath's body, the novel's apocryphal story suggests a return to the local, sacred and intimate, recognizing the brothers as two sides of the same self, no longer other: "All Gamini knew... was that this would be the end or that it could be the beginning of a permanent conversation with Sarath. If he did not talk to him in this moment, admit himself, his brother would disappear from his life" (288). While Gamini and Sarath differ in their views, the shared loss of marriage, Ravina and loss of self literally binds them as *blood brothers*. By urging the reader to imagine a "pieta between brothers" (287), Ondaatje foregrounds a community of loss. This scene of bereavement and death is so powerful and emotionally raw because Ondaatje makes the loss of a brother so intensely personal and universal. Ondaatje is able to use the medium of fiction to full effect by evoking compassion for the real subjects that experience such intense forms of loss, and a sensitivity to others that emblematises the novel's ethical and principled nature.

When witnessing for the first time the meeting between brothers, Anil recalls that "[t]here had been no touching between [Gamini] and Sarath, not a handshake" (129). On the other hand, by the end of the novel, Anil recalls how she was a "beard" between them (285): "On Galle Face Green the brothers had talked comfortably because of her presence... It was a long time later that she realised they were in fact speaking only to each other" (285). This makes clear that while Anil is the bridge between the characters and their stories, Sarath is the hero of *Anil's Ghost*, the selfless servant to the embeddedness of truth and meaning.

With Anil finally seeing how different forms of truth and knowledge are supplementary and complementary, she unearths a "necessary intimacy" (171) with the local Sri Lankan populace. Much of Anil's dis-location and sense of being out of place in her birth-country is overcome when she is finally able to identify the victims of civil war not as strangers, but as her own people: "Sarath in the back row, unseen by her, listened to her explanations... she was no longer just a foreign authority. Then he heard her say, 'I think you murdered hundreds of us.' *Hundreds of us*. Sarath thought to himself. Fifteen years away and she is finally *us*" (272, italics in original).

However, despite the restorative power of touch and inter-relation of the fraternal, maternal, and paternal, Ondaatje exposes that there can be only a single recognition of atrocity by including the modernist recognition of a greater picture disclosed as public story: “[It] was here that the three of them haunted a public story. ‘The drama of our time,’ the poet Robert Duncan remarked, ‘is the coming of all men into one fate’ (202). While speaking back to trauma through the similar disembodied voices of various author-figures, “one fate translates into the novel’s repudiation of cultural differences and its faith in the transformative power of art and local craftsmanship” (Harting 50). Consequently, the novel’s metaphorical archaeology comes full circle in its penultimate section entitled “The Life Wheel” that centres on Ananda.

This section recalls the miner’s folk song at the novel’s beginning that introduces its archaeological focus), while it literally refers to a pit-wheel bringing miner’s to the surface after night shifts in the mines and fittingly exposes the identification of Sailor as miner Ruwan Kumara. As Ananda is also a miner, Ondaatje demonstrates how forensic science alone cannot witness the deceased Kumara, but that the haunted yet living Ananda can live a productive life as artificer, commemorating others. This ultimately communal vision of one fate – *after* trauma and destruction and *before* ethical relationships and material restoration – is anticipated in the novel’s penultimate scene, where the profound sensitivity towards the body found in the pieta between brothers is sharply contrasted by a cold, journalistic reporting of the assassination of Sri Lankan president Katugala and his body’s complete disappearance. This scene mirrors a similar passage in *Handwriting*, where Ondaatje describes a grotesquely violent fictitious yet realistic suicide bombing that not only kills the Sri Lankan President but completely annihilates surrounding bodies as well: “[...] Ear channels deformed by shockwaves. Men without balance surrounding the dead President on Armour Street. Those whose bodies could not be found” (*Handwriting* 28).

In a similar manner, *Anil’s Ghost* briefly yet explosively tracks a suicide bomber known simply as R. as he prepares to unleash a ballistic missile strapped to his body (284-287). Since body and weapon link intimately throughout the novel’s evocation of war and trauma, in its climax they now become unified as one, mirroring how the novel’s fragmented yet inter-related ideas are bound by the book as a textual unity, as one form of archaeological excavation and disclosure. Instead of an embodied or embedded (relational) consciousness, the suicide bomber becomes a vehicle of murderous intent, with bodies both the means and end of death for him and others. With his consciousness cloudy and his body literally exploded, the suicide bomber succeeds not only in exploding the body of the president, but also in destroying a part of the country’s body politic. Similarly, Ondaatje intentionally places representational distance between the fictional event of suicide bombing in the novel and its realistic account, by relaying information unemotionally and journalistically. The novel thus performs the lack of humanity and human-ness in terror attacks. Similarly, the

aftermath of trauma leaves the need for representational alternatives to demonstrate a form of material restoration in the fictional novel and in “reality”.

After private trauma has consistently juxtaposed public tragedy in *Anil's Ghost's*, with its concluding chapter “Distance”, the destruction of the Sri Lankan president and body politic are metonymically revitalised by the material restoration of a Buddha statue in a Sri Lankan field. By discussing the novel's final scene, read by various critics as redemptive, hopeful, or triumphalist, I argue that Ananda actively performs the remembrance of an entire nation's dead, and by implication his wife Sirissa.

Through “complex and innovative” (301) work on a new Buddha – where various small and large fragments are overlaid in a way analogous to the novel's stories and varied voices – Ananda brings various fragments together without attempting to reassemble them in a perfect replica. *Divisadero* mirrors this narrative form – which I discuss in the next chapter – where an unconventional family separated early in the narrative is ultimately not re-united. While paradoxically disclosing the intimacy between bodies and texts, Ananda decides to leave the “quilted” face of the Buddha as fragmented presence, more than the sum of its parts:

Up close the face looked quilted. They had planned to homogenise the stone, blend the face into a unit, but when he saw it this way Ananda decided to leave it as it was. He worked instead on the composure and the qualities of the face. (302)

Similarly, *Anil's Ghost* ultimately gestures towards an intimate form of trauma/witness writing. The novel gathers more than the fragments of a single story of trauma, dislocation and violence to dramatise a palimpsest of human voices and relational intimacy through a variety of reflective and open-ended stories. Consequently, Ondaatje's metafictional history synthesises various stories in an ethical gesture, demonstrating how individual stories of trauma and loss can aesthetically and ethically represent a greater quilting of voices, without ultimately (re)constructing a hegemonic form of truth and knowledge in its writing. With the deliberately delicate quilting in the novel's final section, as in the final representation of relation in *The English Patient*, Ondaatje suggests that fragments of lives, material artefacts, landscapes and texts can be brought together in imaginative relation, but that their individual properties and fragmentation must be left exposed.

The Buddha that Ananda paints the eyes on ultimately represents what the statue of the Virgin Mary and others in *The English Patient* does for Kip – a singular yet communal material presence of serene stillness linking past and present, self and other. Ananda's regenerative archaeological process, embodied through material restoration, reminds us of aesthetic imperatives that transcend destruction: “[Ananda] looked at the eyes that once belonged to a god. This is what he felt. As an artificer now he did not celebrate the greatness



of a faith. But he knew if he did not remain an artificer he would become a demon” (303). Through the consistent depiction of forms of violence and intimacy through the narrative presence of the blade, destructive potential is present in Anil’s stabbing of Cullis and Ananda’s attempted suicide, yet Gamini uses the very same instrument to *save* lives. Along with Ondaatje’s refusal to sever ties with the dead, this idea of community and the novel’s desire to give voice to different referents ultimately invokes one voice speaking for many, akin to rhizomatic diffusion: “The novel’s narrative fragments the particular genealogies of war and individual experiences of villages and war victims into three “simultaneous sprouts” of one story of human tragedy” (Kaplan 87).

*Anil’s Ghost* thus ultimately embodies *one* traumatic story:

Gamini’s and Sarath’s private war over a woman reflects Sri Lanka’s civil war; Anil’s search for Sailor’s past mirror’s her friend Leaf’s struggle against Alzheimer’s disease; Western movies assume the same significance as the Culuvamsa, one of the founding chronicles in Sinhalese nation narration. (Harting 51)

As “[o]ne victim can speak for many victims” (176), a “new order” revives both living and dead souls, while Ondaatje “peg[s] the blueprints in the earth’ (300), showing how the ethical face-to-face encounter and intimacy of human nature can sanctify the dead without attempting to fully restore the loss of the living. In this (re)constructive process and communal vision of propinquity and affection, Ananda celebrates Sirissa’s indelible impression on his life while aware how all people – not only the traumatised – carry the presence of loved ones within: “In the coldness of the world, halfway up, it seemed that only the firs below connected him to the earth... He and the woman Anil would always carry the ghost of Sarath Diyasena...” (305)

While Palipana employs his imagination to draw links the human eye cannot see, Ananda is empowered and exalted from his embattled existence by the careful reconstruction of the Buddha statue. As Ananda is perched high on the scaffolding, he “looked at the eyes that had once belonged to a god. This is what he felt” (304). These lines recall Palipana’s earlier words noting the creative power the artificer employs when recreating the Buddha’s features, particularly the eyes: “Without the eyes there is not just blindness, there is nothing. There is no existence. The artificer brings to life sight and truth and presence” (99). Tessa Derrickson argues that Ananda’s reconstruction is “immanently symbolic” of a restoration that “might eventually re-unite the different factions of Sri Lanka into something whole and stable as well” (148). Having uncovered an intimate chronicle of trauma in *Anil’s Ghost*, there is no longer a division between the natural and cultural but a necessary intimacy:

[...] The birds flew through the shelves of heat currents. The tiniest of hearts in them beating exhausted and fast, the way Sirissa had died in the story he had invented for her in the vacuum of her disappearance. A small brave heart... He felt the boy's concerned hand on his. This sweet touch from the world. (307)

Geena Ganapathy-Dore argues that “[m]ore than the triumph of art, what the novel is pre-occupied with is the re-assertion of life itself, which is the fountainhead of all art” (Ganapathy-Dore14). Fittingly, *Anil's Ghost's* metafictional trauma writing and intimate witnessing produces archaeology of how “[in] terror we lean in the direction that is most unlike us. Running past [our] own character into pain” (*Coming Through Slaughter* 94). This takes place before Ondaatje discloses the “chaotic tumbling of events [encapsulated as forms of death and dislocation], realigned to “suggest both the chaos and the order it will become” (*ISL* 3). Where Ishtiyah Shukri's *The Silent Minaret* enquires whether *people crack, their lives disintegrating when their cities do* (4), *Anil's Ghost* embodies aesthetically the intimate caress, ethical relation and material restoration of other bodies. In “Auguries of Innocence”, William Blake presents an imaginative vision capable of uniting rather than distancing the general from the particular, and connecting the corporeal with the creative. In a similar fashion to being able to “see a world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower” (Blake 11), Ananda is able to see “gaps within the trees”, “shelves of heat currents”, and the “tiniest of hearts” within the birds he sees (*AG* 307). Through such visions, he is able to “hold infinity in the palm of [his] hand, and eternity in an hour” (Blake 11).

In his next work of fiction, *Divisadero*, Ondaatje presents a third layer of his meditation on the novel form, viewed as a form of (auto)biography where the novel's two main author-figures are for the first time in this study represented as two writers.

## Chapter 4

### “A Folded Map of the Heart” – Memory, Autobiography, and Story in *Divisadero*

He turns the page backwards... All these fragments of memory... so we can retreat from the grand story and stumble accidentally upon a luxury, one of those underground pools where we can sit still. Those moments, those few pages in a book we go back and forth over.

– Michael Ondaatje – *In the Skin of a Lion*

Great art picks up where nature ends.

– Marc Chagall.

The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life.

– William Faulkner.

All the best stories in the world are but one story in reality – the story of escape. It is the only thing which interests us all and at all times, how to escape.

– Arthur Christopher Benson.

As a densely written, distinctly private novel that documents the life-stories of a diverse cast of characters, Ondaatje’s *Divisadero* is akin to the works of Modernist writers such as Joyce and Forster, and forms part of a firmly established literary preoccupation where key events shatter many lives and echo across them. With varied reactions to the novel, ranging from “a beautifully crafted tale” (Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel) to “a strangely broken-back beast of a novel” (Seattle Times), it is perhaps a passage from Pico Iyer in the *New York Review of Books* that is most illuminating: “The question that insistently haunts [Ondaatje’s] elliptical and delicate works is how much their very beauty takes us away from the wars and scenes of great pain they describe, and to what extent, in courting art, they leave real life behind” (5).

An answer to the problem Iyer identifies, it is through the novel’s distracting “beauty” that we ultimately “leave real life behind” by *reshaping* it. Because a novel represents a world, but also *organises* it according to its own technologies, it emphasises certain things and deemphasises others within the parameters of genre, and serves the (technical) needs of

narrative. The notion of the novel as an imaginative material collection of emotions, thoughts and ideas (intangible matter), a gathering of physically expressive actions and forms of intimacy (embodied relationships with the world and other bodies) that reshapes the world, is founded upon a view of the world as a fragmented place. Such a place in such an argument consists of and is constructed out of subjective meeting points and corporeal subject matter. Since the world we encounter in the novel starts to shape the world that we inhabit (or starts to shape our *consciousness* of that world) and because real social and historical conditions inevitably influence the ideas expressed in the novel, this foregrounds a reciprocal yet indeterminate relationship between novel and world. Ultimately, we use forms of art and literature to construct our *own* kind of personal narrative, cutting and pasting with the help of art a coherent version of life onto our own perceptions.

To make this analogy persuasive, I focus in this chapter on the closely interrelated concerns of memory and story, and the ways in which these focus points help to direct a close reading of the novel as a kind of *fictional autobiography*. By following Derrida to argue that all writing rests on autobiography (a notion derived from Friedrich Nietzsche's idea that all "philosophical" writing is always already a form of autobiography), such a reading shows how "real" life and "fictional" novels are intimately connected by their narrative qualities. Such an argument also reveals how our intimate relationships with other bodies contextualise and co-author the "textual" nature of life as an embodied story, and illuminates how the "intertextual" nature of life itself in time produces autobiographers and, eventually, autobiographies. With forms of understanding stemming from the close reading of the other's life-story, the "reading" of others and the writing of our own life "book" becomes the healing enterprise that sutures life's inexorable fragmentation and irreconcilable divisions.

In her article on *Divisadero*, Sophie De Smyter argues that Ondaatje "foregrounds that both sign and subject are always already divided, split, double, and in the process of becoming..." (De Smyter 99). Similarly, Maria Concillio notes how "*Divisadero* [paradoxically] designs both a precise topography as well as the direction of a destiny" (Concillio 13). These two quotes, and the aforementioned passage by Lyer, direct my reading of the novel as a fictional text with a sustained interest in boundaries, both as meeting places and marks of division. This central interest comes across, as in Ondaatje's other works of fiction, as the division between geopolitical places in the real world and the apocryphal, boundary-crossing world of the novel, while these boundaries also figure in the affiliative but also divisive relationships between family, friends, readers and writers. Ultimately, through a continual focus on autobiography, memory and story, the novel is most interested in the superordinate category that encompasses all the others, the connection between fiction and life.

This connection is revealed through representations of the fundamental relationship between the author as “function of the narrative” and the author as a corporeal body, a *real person* with ethical commitments who lives in the real world: in other words, between the “autobiographical” world of the author or the self, and the “fictional” world, which both belongs to him and in a sense escapes him. Since our world is a substantial material environment simultaneously all around us yet never fully controlled or understood, our experiences and relationships are coloured and “created” by our own subjective vantage points. Correspondingly, because memory as a “fictional” archaeological narrative of past life “reshapes, attempts to comfort, addresses changing needs” (Hodgkin and Radstone 16), the *novel* as an parallel material book that analogously records and re-members life-stories through a form of autobiography embodies Nietzsche’s dictum that “we have art so that we shall not be destroyed by the truth” (279), protected from the “raw truth of events” (279).

Accordingly, by staging the interconnections between self and world, “art” and “reality” between the two covers of the book, a material unity with a beginning and ending that nevertheless remains open-ended, *Divisadero* discloses a distinct relationship between lives and texts, and an intimate correspondence between formal structure and thematic concerns. The novel removes conceptual distance between genres – synthesising fragments of jazz and gypsy music, crime thrillers, biographical/academic writing, American novels of the Midwest and on-the-road narratives, and the European picaresque genre, while destabilising our conventional sense of time with a cinematic gaze and theatrical flair.

Ondaatje suggests that we engage with others in an itinerant, interconnective project to read and make sense of the negatives of private memory and personal history. The *liquid* status of the writer, positioned between states of (dis)connection, dramatises this venture *par excellence*. In an interview with Catherine Bush, Ondaatje notes: “I found I could both reveal and discover myself more through being given a costume. I could be more honest about the things I wanted to talk about or witness” (240). An essential thesis of my reading of both *The English Patient* and *Anil’s Ghost* – that books and lives are essentially intertextual, and that the fictional reading relationships between bodies and texts mirror intimacies between subjects in the real world – resurfaces here, as “the most striking aspect of *Divisadero* may be its tender encomium to literature” (Mcgill19).

With a title where the etymology of the Spanish word “Divisar” denotes both a sense of distance or detachment and the viewing of events from different perspectives or varied vantage points, *Divisadero*’s fictional evocation of metaphorical distance dramatises a sense of distance between fictional characters, speaking to distance or division between reality and illusion, memory and reality, between the world as it is, and the way that we see it. Within the novel’s title, the suggestion of boundaries or borders appear in the words “divide”, “void”, “side”, and “roads”, while a sense of movement, passage or travel is evident in words such as

“visa”, “drive” and “drove”, “dive”, “dove”, “do”, “avoid”, “raid” and “read”. On a related note, division of the novel’s *form* into clearly demarcated chapters – that nevertheless remain reflective and interconnective – mirrors the divisions between characters and stories<sup>12</sup>.

Through the evocation of material and metafictional borders and borderlands through a body of text, the novel relates how “Divisadero” is the name given to an actual street, situated on a border between California and Mexico, while France and Spain also have border between them. Divisadero Street as physical address and personal home for a “divided” subject makes concrete the novel’s *abstract* idea of a disjuncture between an idea and its physical referent or representation, and the split between an author’s life and the metaphorical life of his/her work. Centrally concerned with the necessarily fictional nature of autobiography due to its “partial vision” (255), Ondaatje’s anatomical analysis investigates the sleight of hand involved in the authorial process. In this process, various reconstructions – that of an old cabin, a water tower, different clocks and a belltower – mirror the ways that we “author” our lives through our relationship to the world and intimate relationships with others.

Redolent of his writing in *The English Patient* and *Anil’s Ghost*, *Divisadero* concomitantly locates the genitive domain of the family as a site of violence and loss, as a contested terrain where a sense of intimacy, familiarity or nearness is deeply problematic. As a tentative response to emotional and physical destruction, the author offers various forms of affiliative connections, forms of kinship not contingent upon blood relations. With a kaleidoscopic yet intimate focus on “finite love or an unrecognised affection” (275), the novel interrogates notions of familial intimacy through relationships between Anna and Coop, Segura and Marie-Neige, Lucette and Pierre, and Marie-Neige and Roman. Whereas unsanctioned love between Anna and Coop recalls the tragic love of Buddy Bolden and Robin in *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), and brings to mind the affair between the English Patient and Katherine in *The English Patient*, “[c]onstant references to jazz pieces and songs – Ondaatje’s favourite musical genre – also reinforce [these] connection[s]” (Concilio 15).

This reference to music is realised in the novel through Ondaatje’s insistence on the analogous nature of music and the writing process, expressive forms that mediate and counter the divisive and disjunctive process of being in the world. Subsequently, the novel offers various forms of intimacy and love closely connected to desire that speak back to such disjunctures and forms of separation. Since all of *Divisadero*’s characters are essentially emotionally wounded and enigmatic, their intimacy – often enabled through self-revelation or storytelling – is especially important and revealing. Love can be violent, as in the case of

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that the “o” ending of the novel’s title in Latin and modern Italian point to a self that reflects or sees, an “eye”, while also more obviously to an “I” (amo= I love, amas= you love, amat= he/she/it loves).

Roman and Marie-Neige, and can lead to violence, as in the case of Anna and Coop, Coop and Bridget, while the trauma of violence can conversely lead to the path of love, as in the case of Rafael and Anna, and Lucien Segura and Marie-Neige. Ultimately, the novel's intimate gestures of reading, listening, and care – reminiscent of *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost* – suggest that the other as a kind of text with its own autobiographical traces must be read closely, just as the reader continuously revives real memories and immortalises fictional texts through re-reading and storytelling.

From the start of *Divisadero*, Ondaatje approaches stories from varied vantage points, alternating between an authorial voice and the voice of Anna, the novel's central narrator and a character more than superficially recalling *The English Patient's* Hana. Throughout the novel, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between the Ondaatje's authorial voice and the narrative voice of Anna – alternately deeply intimate or deliberately opaque – who appears to disclose most of the novel's action and reflections while consistently destabilising the reader's sense of certainty and familiarity. Corresponding to *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost*, an *italicised text* precedes the first section of *Divisadero*, where an I-narrator, someone previously known as Anna, addresses an anonymous "you" (3). It is unclear whether it is another character or the reader, alerting us to the fact that Ondaatje continues to develop a boundary-crossing and intimate philosophy of authorship in the novel. Since the phrase "When I come to lie in your arms" (3) opens the text, Ondaatje warns us not to get too comfortable since "lie" both connotes "lying down" and "telling lies".

With the name of *Divisadero's* central protagonist and focaliser Anna a palindrome and a coordinate that crystallises a distinctly personal exploration of forms of division, doubling, and revision, the novel's unreliable narrator informs us of events that took place many years before their present narration. To supplement the revelation that Anna has changed her name in order to (re)write and tell stories (90, 38), her difficult and elliptical re-membering both amplifies the novel's view of memory as a malleable and impressionable narrative, and forces us to confront the way that the novel as a whole is a kind of reconstruction from storytelling fragments. While *The English Patient* starts in Italy and *Anil's Ghost* in Guatemala, *Divisadero* traces its exploration of the family and affiliative connections to the Elysian Fields of Californian farm life circa 1970, where, in the present tense, Anna's adult voice re-reads the events of her childhood and early adult life in the past. Analogous to the way that writers construct novels from events and scenarios that exist in their *mind's eye*, Anna paints a stark picture of her own and Claire's early life with their father and Coop, thereafter she literally seems to disappear for a period from the narrative, her voice replaced by omniscient narration. Through her recollections, the narrative immediately exposes its archaeological interest, with the first character introduced by Anna being her half-sister Claire, who "watches from a distance without dismounting" on the back of her horse Territorial while the town bar is on fire (7).

The introduction of Claire alludes to a restless nature. Often figured on horseback, in the presence of Territorial she loses her limp and seems destined to be “in charge of the universe... Someday she will meet and marry a centaur” (7). The OED variously defines the centaur as “[a] fabulous creature, with the head, trunk, and arms of a man, joined to the body and legs of a horse”; “an unnatural hybrid creation”; “an intimate union of two diverse natures”. The assertion from Shakespeare’s *King Lear* – that “[d]own from the waist they’re centaurs, / [t]hough women all above” echoes in the aforementioned descriptions (Act IV, Scene VI, 124-125). This reference to centaurs, popularised by Greek and particularly Roman mythology as liminal figures that mediate *between* passion and reason, helps Ondaatje to suggest that authors are situated between the “fact” of the outside world and the “fictional” domain of the novel, between interior “narratives” and outside “action”.

This sense of liminality and movement embodied by the author sheds light on the novel’s blurred boundaries between nature and culture, man and animal, and speaks to the ways that the *writer* can be viewed as a kind of centaur, a boundary-crossing, corporeal vessel that reveals various conceptions of humanity through words. Since the disequilibrium of our lives and natures betray us as “unnatural hybrid creations” that personify the “intimate union of two diverse natures”, this view of the author as centaur corresponds to Ondaatje’s view of the itinerant nature of narrative and the novel, and to the continuous geographical restlessness of his own works and the characters that inhabit and embody them. Likewise, because the novel’s first scene is narrated by Anna, who describes an “unwitnessed” *adult* Claire riding, we are immediately aware that *Divisadero*’s telling forms of revelation will be neither objective nor without an impressionistic, episodic blend of fact and fiction<sup>13</sup>.

In Anna’s recollections of life on the farm, the makeshift family of herself, Claire, Coop and the father are bound by routine, familiarity and simplicity. Part of a tentative affiliative group rather than a family connected through blood ties, Coop never ever speaks in the text, just like the father, only ever referred to in the third person voice of the adult Anna. Adept in the physical world, descriptions of Coop’s “taciturn manner” and “tentativeness about words” (9) invoke the characterisation of Patrick Lewis and Nicholas Temelcoff from *In the Skin of a Lion*: “Nicholas never catches anyone’s eye, as if he must hear the orders nakedly without seeing a face around the words... He has no portrait of himself...” (*ISL* 45)

Coop’s social removal stems from the “terrible violence” of the murder of his parents while he hid under the floorboards (9), and his early trauma forces him to seek refuge in stories “about gold camps and gold mines in the Californian northeast, about those who had risked

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<sup>13</sup> For a further discussion of this point, see De Smyter 99-118.



everything at a riverbed on a left turn and so discovered a fortune” (9). During Coop’s Gold Rush “obsession”, he sees that gold mining offers him “euphoria and chance”, a “tall story that included a murder or mistaken identity or a love affair” (14-15), a revelation foreshadowing Coop’s episodic life in the novel. Correspondingly, the potential rivers harness to both wash away and re-route channels of water suggests a confluence or convergence of different elements, much like great novels and the lives that they study and document. References to rivers also stand as symbols of the subconscious, and repressed or traumatic memories that we might have of the past, while gesturing toward the fluidity and malleability of memory and the authorial insistence that boundaries and borders are always unstable and permeable.

Comparable to the ways that writing (much like life itself) intimates connections between various natural and cultural elements, bodies and memories, *Divisadero*’s references to water and river spaces appear in sections dealing with the Petaluma *family farm* (37), the river as the *final card* in a Poker game (58), the *name* of a café (the River Café) (78), and an actual river and clearing close to Segura’s home (87), as well as his tributary recollections of Marie-Neige (260). To provide yet another example of how the novel and author are situated to present recollections and narratives *between* private memory and public history, embodied memories and memory as a story, Anna informs us how the *absence* of a mother in the lives of the girls is embodied in an archival recording of a “ghost”, her mother Lydia Mendez, in “not much more than a pamphlet with a white spine... ” (9)

In its minute portrayal of her life, her subdued voice remains lost somewhere between the worlds of the living and the dead. Since Ondaatje intentionally writes Anna into the novel as a writer, it stands to reason that the novel and author must synthesise various storytelling strands into a coherent whole while simultaneously showing how no story is ever told *only once*, and document how autobiographical forms and memories are both communal and individually centred. Also excluded from the book Anna finds and reads is the “gesture” of a father that reaches beyond the grave with “the adoption of a child from the same hospital where his wife was giving birth – the daughter of another mother, who had also died – bringing both children home and raising the other child... Claire, as his own... (11). Anna relates Lucien Freud’s assertion that everything is biographical, “what we make, why it is made... who it is we are drawn to, why we cannot forget” (17), a view that draws our attention to Ondaatje’s motion-capturing writing where the smallest events or moments attain tremendous significance, and one that foregrounds (re)construction (“what we make”), desire, affiliation and community (“who it is we are drawn to”), and trauma and re-membering (“who we cannot forget”) in Ondaatje’s oeuvre.

For Ondaatje, to remember through the embodied, “intertextual” story of memory is to remember what we think we know, supporting Hunt’s assertion that “[n]o matter how complete our idea of a person or an event may be it is always adulterated by our own subjectivity” (6). With memory as a (re)active archive housing fragments of “raw truth”, shards of memory act as prisms to the unattainable “whole truth”, and the full extent of events and their significance can never be fully known or witnessed. In the same way, while the novel’s boundary-crossing intersection between the natural and cultural continuously blurs distinctions between past (memory) and present (experience), memory – through our relation to others – bifurcates into two closely related, often-indistinguishable spheres: our memories of others and ourselves as *individuals* at specific times, and our memories *with others* during specific periods.

If memory can be viewed as the embodied archive that speaks back to us in its own distorted language, then there is a clear relationship between memories as narrative of our lives, and the ways that memories are texts that require close reading to be contextualised and understood. Ondaatje consequently suggests that the novel is a powerful memorial technology, able to show how the “gate-less” (259) past can be documented. This insistence connects to a range of incidents, amongst others Anna’s constant revision of her own story and the story of others; Coop and Claire’s memories of each other and his memories of his time with Anna; and Segura’s final collection of stories, which I discuss below.

In their writings on the nature of memory, Hodgkin and Radstone note “disruptions are intrinsic to memory itself (which distorts, conflates, masks, omits)” (4-5), Luckhurst arguing similarly that “memory is always contemporary, caught up in the politics of the present, and always con-temporal, bringing disjunct times together” (91). These “contemporary” conceptions of memory provide a sense of the ways in which memory brings the past in line with the present moment, the here-and-now, connecting “disjunct times” as the link between moments. Whereas “memory and history are *not* identical” (King 104), the novel makes the writing process and character of memory analogous. With both entities highly subjective, selective, continuous and built around re-vision, reflection and re-remembering, *Divisadero* concurrently insists upon an analogous relation between our lives and those we know and love: “There is the hidden presence of others in us, even those we have known briefly. We contain them for the rest of our lives, at every border that we cross” (17).

Comparable to the way naming conflates the object and the name, the person and the personality (an important point I discuss below), memory too inexorably conflates the book and its cover, the photo and its frame, removing “borders”. Before the sisters cross the border into adulthood, and to subconsciously “capture” this “hidden presence”, the family take portraits of each passing year between Christmas and New Year, where, “captured in a black-and-white photograph, “the yearly episode was something [the father] needed, like a carefully laid table that would clarify the past” (18). Before Anna many years later narrates

the events that would separate her and Claire on the cusp of their adult lives in order to similarly “clarify the past”, Anna relates how “[a]s sisters we reflected each other, competed with each other, and our shared idol was Coop” (16). The sisters are “revealed” and “betrayed” by their poses (18), “study[ing] [them]selves” in an “evolving portrait” that “made [them] secretly competitive” (18). Whereas the price of Anna’s knowledge recalls that of Anil with her loss of family, the distancing between the sisters begins with confusion of their names during a violent storm, where Anna is left in the barn with a frightened Territorial that lashes out at her, subsequently protected by Coop. The subsequent recollection of this incident – where “something significant happened” – is defined by a “broken path”, left hazy and indeterminate (18).

Luckhurst’s insightful argument that “the historical past is *irrecoverable*; memory alone is the access to it, and memory is the malleable narrative always open to *retro-active re-description*” (91, my emphasis) echoes in this passage, and this view of memory complements Ondaatje’s take on memory itself, as an inherently “broken path” that perpetuates its brokenness through “retroactive re-description”. With our life course mirroring the coarse “skin” of our memories, by definition unrefined, unprocessed, whole, Ondaatje argues that it is an inherently fragmenting experience to live, and it is only through “fictional” memory and story that we are able to make sense of life’s fragments.

By taking full account of memory’s revisionist character, of the loss of memory and the memory of loss, *Divisadero* suggests that the price of epiphanous one-ness is ironically isolation and aloneness in the world. Consequently, in their unconscious desire to be apart of the other, Anna notes that “[s]omething happened in the horse barn... [W]e would now need to be distinctly Anna and distinctly Claire... There was a border now between us...” (20). By then conflating the memory of *absence* and the absence of *memory* that complicate the writing of a life-story, *Divisadero* traces the contention by Hodgkin and Radstone that

we measure the passage of time in ourselves against the houses that have been built since we walked down a given road as a child, and the children who have already grown to adulthood in those new houses; we return to landscapes known before they were transformed by some tremendous upheaval, and experience the dislocating impossibility of their difference. (12)

The sisters’ paths divert like river streams with the “dislocating impossibility” of the “passage of time” (Hodgkin and Radstone 12), while “it was [Coop’s] desire to escape all this that made him move into [and rebuild] the grandfather’s cabin” (*Divisadero* 23). Whereas Patrick in *In the Skin of a Lion* desires to blow up a Canadian water filtration plant, Coop slowly and meticulously rebuilds the cabin in a process akin to the painstaking care caught up in narrative craft, aware that because “[w]ood deteriorated at a boundary, it was where the weakness would occur” (24). In a metafictional novel that relentlessly draws attention to its

own artifice, this self-reflexive passage is instrumental to the novel's insistence on the analogy between the "weakness" and "tremendous upheaval" experienced by all of Ondaatje's characters. This passage also showcases the ways that their tragic flaws or trauma ironically allows them to cross the boundary between self and other, between estrangement or displacement and corporeal intimacy. In turn, these boundary-crossing human relationships reflect Ondaatje's careful construction of novels from various inter-related fragments that coalesce to suggest something more about the world and the bodies that inhabit it.

To return to Coop's story, the distance of the cabin from the farmhouse allows for an affair between Anna and Coop, with an air of uncertainty that pervades their intimate relations, leaving Anna to question: "Was what happened a sin or a natural act?" (26). In the stillness between herself and Coop, she realises that a gulf has ironically appeared between herself, Claire and her father, and Ondaatje again suggests that the consequence of epiphanous oneness with another body appears to be a divided life and familial separation. Nevertheless, in their lovemaking, it feels to them "as if one heartbeat was at work" (27). As their time together increases, Coop and Anna have days where they distance themselves from touch, discovering the "greater distances in each other" (34). When Coop works, Anna reads stories of musketeers in Dumas' France – mirroring *The English Patient's* Hana in her escapist readings – while her relationship with Coop echoes Hana's time with Kip, since both women study the exotic other. Akin to the manner in which Ondaatje stages the gradual intersection of various natural and cultural elements, Anna buys a set of Buddhist flags, elements working together to form a perfect harmony: "There are five flags, she explained. The yellow one is earth, the green is water, the red is fire – the one we must escape – and white is clouds, and blue is sky, limitless space or mind" (30).

Subsequently, in a telling moment of mutual silence, "the extremity of what was happening between them" (30) dawns on Anna, and "[t]hunder explode[s] over the deck while they were lying there, holding on to each other, as of it had come down a funnel onto their nakedness" (32). With their "turbulent" intimacy ready to "explode", their father's direct discovery of the affair – with the pair *in flagrante delicto* – sets in motion a vicious event of separation to haunt all three siblings' stories. The father violently attacks Coop's face and body, ironically trying to undo the "damage", to "remove what had happened" (33-34). Literally tearing the lovers apart, the father shatters any remaining intimacy with his family. As Coop lies beaten and temporarily blind, the white flag outside is unseen, a loss of innocence suggested potently: "He could see nothing... [T]he five bannered flags... flew parallel to the ground" (35).

Aware that the search for the lost and forgotten is "as uncertain as prayer" (39), Claire "looked back and saw that the water tower had buckled under its weak legs... She was alone, sixteen years old, on a horse that bristled with nervousness and temper..." (39). This scene not only foreshadows her continuous need for escape as an attorney's aid, but in her distant

witnessing of destruction, the “surfacing” of “black mud” (37) shows how Claire is exposed to emotional trauma, and how she tries to “ride” past “black mud” by finding roads into other life-stories, a discussion I return to below.

Separated by bloodshed and literally and metaphorically running from her family, Anna meets a kind black truck driver that lets her travel with him, a gesture of kindness and compassion that echoes in similar gestures throughout the novel. When Anna and the unnamed truck driver stop over at various locations that include abandoned towns, he reads to Anna a quote from the opening page of Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield*. The man informs her that books “signalled the possibilities of our lives”, reciting “the most beautiful lines”: ‘Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show’” (152). Since *Divisadero* is similarly concerned with the “station” of fictional characters in terms of their own life-stories and memories – with a concomitant sense of “education” through close relations with others – Ondaatje shows a kinship to the generic concerns of the Bildungsroman. He suggests that great art builds bridges, to “signal” life’s “possibilities” through the capturing of (e)motion.

Although we tend to think of the road as a space with clearly demarcated paths and a set course, roads in the novel allow for many different intersections and chance meetings, metafictionally encompassing various arterial routes, crescents and avenues. With the geographical restlessness of the novel’s cast of characters reflecting its view of art as a itinerant domain of escape, and by mirroring the novel’s nomadic narrativisation suggests that life itself centres around the open-ended accumulation of meaning and experiences analogous to the process of reading and writing. My discussion of *The English Patient* and *Anil’s Ghost* notes how intertextuality functions to establish links between widely divergent spaces, places, moments and people, weaving a dense tapestry of meaning. Similarly, *Divisadero* joins the public and private, natural and cultural, and foregrounds how meaning is disclosed through intertextual conversation between authorial voices and the accumulation of interleaved layers. The novel’s sense of intertextuality is not only concerned with overlapping reflections and allusions between autobiography, psychology, genetics, and fiction-writing, but expands to include the ways in which life itself can be seen as an intertextual process, one where individual life-stories are richly supplemented and co-written by those that we come into close contact with.

As a family saga bringing together many different characters, stories and locations, the novel’s first section set mostly in Petaluma has many different intertexts, with its evocation of rural landscapes and the family resonating with the writings of the American Midwest like John Steinbeck, D.H Lawrence, and more recently, that of Cormac McCarthy. Shakespeare’s *King Lear* echoes as the division of property between daughters, patriarchy, the incest taboo, and madness of the father figures strongly in *Divisadero*, while, in a similar manner, Gabriel

Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* reverberates in Ondaatje's portrait of a rural family that has trouble moving away from blood ties. On the other hand, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and Nabokov's *Lolita* appear to echo in the novel's characterisation of Anna and in the relationship between the writer Lucien Segura and his neighbour, the peasant woman Marie-Neige. Intertextual resonances concerning river- and road-narratives such as those from American Beat generation writers like Jack Kerouac and Mark Twain's *Huck Finn* appear, alongside allusions to European picaresque novels like Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*.

Consequently, parallel to the function of these intertextual allusions as brief narrative performances of "hiding" within art, Anna on the "road" of her life constantly gazes in the rear-view-mirror of memory and looks at stories of others to paradoxically escape *and* make sense of her own, an essential component of what we do with art. After we read about her immediate journey away from the farm, Anna narrates Coop's new life as a gambler in Nevada. At twenty-three, Coop builds his house of cards on keen observational skills; as a watcher and listener as much as willing participant, he connects back to the rivers of his favourite stories with the one card, The River – that would "glance [him] towards [his] fate", "at ease within this chaos and risk" (44).

Coop's affiliative group are a tight-knit yet tentative community: "There was Dorn, Mancini and "The Dauphin," so named because he had been seen reading a European novel. They would enter gambling halls like royalty from Wyoming..." (45). As far as allusions go, a case could be made for a reference to *Huckleberry Finn*'s con-man, who presents himself as "the Dauphin". This draws attention to the novel's ability form to incorporate divergent narrative elements, and links to the novel's other sections of the novel where the European Picaresque form is employed. The King of Hearts in a pack of cards is in fact a metonym for the French king Charlemagne, the One-eyed Jack – suggestively read as one element par of a greater whole. Akin to individual voices that form a choir of life-stories that echo in the telling of others, this establishes a link to the reclusive French writer Segura, who writes in solitude of the characters Roman and his side-kick One-eyes Jacques.

To return to Coop's story, as the youngest of the lot, the group view him as a "compulsive risk taker" (46), one in the process of unravelling Poker's "subterranean world" (49). After Coop is "scammed" a few years earlier in "three-card monte on the pier in San Francisco", he visits a game shop to find "a reprint of *The Expert at the Card Table*... The book bec[omes] a Pandora's box for him" (49). Since this is an ambivalent, self-reflexive metaphor conjoining both literal and figurative damage and knowledge while drawing attention to the book as a kind of "box", and revealing words as potentially harmful, illuminating or ameliorative, this insistence continues Ondaatje's view that knowledge and forms of truth are potentially dangerous, and that forms of revelation are never without consequences. This metaphor also

extends to the character of *memory* as a Pandora's box, an embodied container or enigmatic envelope that literally dis-closes, envelopes or veils what we think we know.

The entrustment of knowledge and a craft from an older generation to the next – analogous to what takes place between the father and Coop, and what will take place between the young Segura and his clockmaker stepfather – now takes place between Coop and Axel, his friend and mentor. At the “no longer functional Jericho Army Base”, a liminal “suburb of the moon” (52), Coop starts to believe that he understands himself well enough to read others. While reading the methodical elements of Poker play, Coop is ironically unable to read *himself*, just like the great Russian author Leo Tolstoy:

[...] ‘Tolstoy was able to walk into a room that held a small group of people and understand everything about them in fifteen minutes. The only person in the room he could not understand in the room was himself. That’s what a good professional is like’. (53)

Once again, this metafictional, self-reflexive passage refers to an actual writer and his own thoughts, with Ondaatje speaking to the role of the author as a “professional” that “walks into [rooms] that hold a small group of people”, learning about himself in the process. Such “walking” then reinforces the view of the novel as a “mirror walking down a road” (EP 97), and underscores how the process of narrative craft is mirrored in the physical actions and thought-processes of Ondaatje’s characters. After much training, Coop pulls off a major con against the powerful Pounce Autry, leader of The Brethren. Although Coop metaphorically finds his “treasure”, his dilemma and subsequent need for escape finds reflection when Dorn’s wife Ruth tells of the author of *Sophie’s Choice*, William Styron, and his admission of the difficulties of writing, *Divisadero* again linking art and life: [...] ‘I think I have already written the most intimate and profound book I will ever be able to write. ... From now on I should try comedy, comedy isn’t easy I know. But at least it is not the same road’ (62).

This quote reveals Ondaatje’s *own* thoughts about the difficulties of the creative process, the immensity of re-producing “the most intimate and profound books”, and how works that “embrace diversity” can circumvent such a quandary (243). One can also read this passage as commentary on Ondaatje’s continuous project to utilise the novel to reflect how others can enrich our lives in myriad ways. After the final goodbyes of Coop’s affiliative group, where he is “forced” to become a “stranger” to his friends (63), *Divisadero* moves from Coop to Anna’s story. Far from her American roots and now fully adult, she moves to French writer Lucien Segura’s house in Gers in France to research his “life and work” (141).

While travelling to Segura’s home, Anna meets her architect friend Branka and they travel past a belfry that Branka’s architectural firm are renovating, a material form I return to subsequently. As artistic, functional creation, the belfry with its “unexpected, helicoidal

shape” (141) suggests *more than* construction: “Built in the thirteenth century, the belfry had been constructed like a coil or a screw... [A]s it curved up it reflected every compass point of the landscape” (141). Since *Divisadero* is a book assembled “like a coil or screw”, a work of finely threaded, inter-connective twists and turns that like the belfry mirrors the “helicoidal shapes” of memory and life itself, “words and details reappear, illuminat[ing] different characters in the same way” (Wadell 3). Consequently, doubling in the novel adds to *Divisadero*’s narrative cohesion and sense of mirroring, reflection and re-reading<sup>14</sup>.

The many examples of doubling in the novel are, most notably, that of an animal attack, a wounded or injured outsider nursed by a woman, a father watching his daughter making love and a craft and skill passed on from an older man to a younger generation. Apart from those examples, Anna and Coop do not mention their names to their lovers (69, 115); Coop and Lucien Segura both end up with damaged eyes (33-34, 206); both Anna and Rafael and Marie-Neige explore Dumas’ novels (28, 200); a blue table reappears constantly in the narrative (30, 70, 197). Just as Coop mistakes Anna and Claire (19-20, 23, 152-53), Segura confuses his two daughters (224), while Marie-Neige mistakenly thinks Segura to be her husband Roman (259). Through these examples of impressionistic narrative doubling, Ondaatje makes an argument about repetition itself in *Divisadero*: that there are uncanny ways in which lives echo one another in the same way that books echo lives, and that the obdurate repetition of certain refrains and motifs in the novel works against the occlusion and elision of memories. As I suggest below, Ondaatje suggests that the writer is able to work in various “houses” and in disguise to “reflect every compass point of the landscape” (97).

Reminiscent of *The English Patient*’s Villa San Girolamo, Segura’s home acts as a material ground analogous to the novel’s book form where Anna *looks into the distance* of her past and finds a way to live a fulfilling life in the present. As a space for recollection and grounded living, the house in Demu – given title and its own chapter – presents an open, undivided space linking past owners, times and selves, contrasts the displacement of travel, and “grounds” the open-ended “gates” of memory. Whereas we metaphorically allow books to enter our homes or conversely enter the “house of fiction” to borrow from Henry James, *Divisadero* is the first of the novels in question to introduce the life-stories of two actual writers when dealing with the nature and role of art and its influence on our lives as readers. Though Ondaatje is clearly the “author” of his own novel, he refuses straightforward authorial designation of meaning brought about by one author fulfilling the “author function”.

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<sup>14</sup> Along with noting post-structuralist and other contemporary cultural and literary examples of twins and the double, De Smyter discusses Anna and Claire as the “most obvious doubles in the novel” (108-112).



In his essay “Death of the Author” (142-148), Barthes argues that the author is a cultural product, a *convention* created by a capitalist society obsessed with individuality and ownership. Simply put, Barthes contends that it is not the author but *language itself* that speaks, therefore we must explore the *writing* and not the author’s intentions, with an indefinite range of potential meanings thus uncovered. As writing suggests a destruction of a point of origin, the “death” of what we could call the “beginning”, the author dies at the moment that the text is produced (147). Since writing is a “tissue of quotations”, we can never know all the meanings, and merely uncover potential interpretations embedded within the multiplicity of reading/writing. For Barthes, to assign an “author” is to limit meaning, to impose judgement on writings. Ultimately, it is the reader (as writer), and not the author, that shapes the ultimate direction of a text. As a performance rather than a documentation of set ideas and circumstances, writing begins with the “death” of the author, and ushers in the “birth” of the reader. Where the author is *past*, the writer is *present*; writing is therefore brought into being by reading, a form of re-writing (148).

In conversation with Barthes in his influential and oft-cited essay, “What is an author?”, Foucault contends that all writers are not authors, but that all authors are *writers*. Foucault proceeds through the course of his essay to problematise what we view as a given, that authors and our notions of authorship has seemingly always been around. Foucault argues it is indeed not a *final* death for the author, but rather a need to reconcile the subject position of the writer with the voice of the narrative that directs and distorts how texts are interpreted and read. After this prophecy of “death”, Foucault leaves us with the suggestion of a post-authorial literary landscape, where new modes of criticism and constraint will surely rear their heads (“Author”, 118-120).

While Derrida assigns the power of the author to writing or language itself, and Barthes suggests that the “death of the author” will usher in the “birth of the reader”, Foucault offers us the “author function” as the ordering mechanism that guides the reception and response to a certain text or set of texts. By noting how the concept of an author came into being at a particular point in time and with a particular set of beliefs and social structures to direct its incorporation into society, the “author”, for Foucault, does not derive directly from the text. What then does the “author function” do? It insists on the identification of the author behind the text in order to decode its meaning. The important thing about the “author function” is that it is a social construct that *governs* the reading of a certain body of texts – in other words, “Shakespeare” accrues a bunch of social meanings in excess of the sum of his texts: these meanings act as a textual *supplement* that governs the way the texts are read or understood (112-116). This form of supplementation is not dissimilar to the Derridean supplement in that it adds layers of meaning to the interpretation of a text, while a lack of closure is put forward by texts without an “author function”.

Without a clearly discernable “author”, the idea of a literary “work” and a nomenclature is under threat. Foucault shows how the distinctions assigned between different demonstrations or materialisations of discourse are arbitrary rather than unitary. For Foucault, the essential questions that surround the meaning and interpretation of texts are: “From where does it come, who wrote it, when, under what circumstances, or beginning with what design?” (109). These questions form the grounds for discourse-classification as “speech that must be received in a certain mode and that must receive a certain status” (107). Since we are generally unsatisfied with narratives that fail to provide this certainty, we find this “intolerable”, initiating the “game” of rediscovering the author” (109).

Foucault states that there are four characteristics of the “author function”:

One – The first characteristic of the “author function” is a legal function, put forward to punish those that make transgressive statements. It is also an appropriative function, as Foucault proceeds to note how discourse became a physically readable and material thing, not just spoken word.

Two – The “author function” affects different texts differently – Foucault argues that is affects *scientific* texts differently to *literary* texts, which are far more subjective in their creation and interpretation.

Three – In order to disclose the complexity around assigning the rights of authorship to a specific author and the issues around attribution of meaning and ownership, Foucault lists St. Jerome’s “criteria of authenticity” (111).

Four – The “author” as term does not refer to the flesh and blood person of the author, rather it refers to the “narrator”, like an alter ego for the actual person behind the text, the “writer”. This gestures towards the influence of person behind the text in the use of time and place, shifts between present and past, the use of personal pronouns, and the plurality of subject positions produced.

Foucault speaks of the Author-God, the modern drive to valorise and exemplify the author behind the work, which he compares to oral narratives that presented discourse in its most basic form. By recognising storytelling as the active postponement of death, and in order to work against spurious celebrations of the author within discourse, Foucault speaks to the “redemption” of author-figures through a “voluntary effacement”, with narrative imbued with the “right to kill” (108, 102). With writing both as a space of metatextual “masks” and metaphorical “marks”, Foucault argues that the game of writing is “a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears” (102). Since fictional and particularly *metafictional* texts often deal with the playful “game of writing” (“Author” 103),

the name of the author and the body of the *text* must be separated. Subsequently, while Foucault notes how narratives like the Greek Epics offered a form of immortality, the slippery space of the novel is where the writer now becomes anonymous after “voluntary effacement” (108), already an inherent part of the “very existence” of the writer’s being.

The “author function” applies to *discourse* as much as to individual works. Foucault contentiously argues that the “founders of discursivity” like Marx or Freud not only produce seminal texts, but produce “the rules or the possibilities for the formation of other texts” (106). Foucault’s formulation of such “founders of discursivity” also intersects meaningfully with Barthes’ notion of a “writerly text”. This is true in the sense that “writerly texts” are deliberately self-reflexive and open-ended, and less bound by “the rules or the possibilities for the formation of other texts” established by the “founders of discursivity” than his “readerly texts” would be (S/Z 5). Correspondingly, the “author function” operates differently in different times and places. Because the author is not a source of infinite meaning but merely a part of a greater discourse at work that governs knowledge and power, it is crucial to foreground again how Foucault views power as embedded *in discourse*, and not that discourse is a part of power relations governed by those *in power*. Since the author has power in discourse, his influence is also *constrained* by the “author function”.

Although Foucault states the “author function” will “disappear” in the future, he does not say what will replace it, merely that it will be a different “system of constraint” and regulations, an “authorless discourse” or post-authorial anonymity without the constraining borders of the “author function” (119-120). Foucault predicts that “fiction and its polysemous texts will once again function according to another mode, but still within a system of restraint – one which will no longer be the author, but which will have to be determined or, perhaps experienced”(120). Without the “author function” performing the role of a “regulator of fiction” (119), the “stirring of an indifference” (120) speaks to a new vision of the author *within* writing, where it matters less who speaks, and more about what is said<sup>15</sup>.

After a brief discussion of Barthes’ and Foucault’s respective views regarding authorship and authority, it is a highly productive exercise to map Ondaatje’s most recent novels in terms of

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<sup>15</sup> In his book *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, Sean Burke correctly elucidates how Foucault conveniently evades the pressing question of power and privilege to those “founders of discursivity” like Marx and Freud, effectively continuing to favour those whose writings are benchmarks within the discursive formations of their subject fields. Correspondingly, as Tom Penner duly notes in the conclusion of his essay “Foucault, Ondaatje and the ‘Eternally Dying’ Author in *The English Patient*: Four Characters in search of an Author-Function”, it is difficult not to recognise Foucault as a founder of discursivity or Author-God, with a privileged status within literary theory and post-structuralism.

their transgression of narrative boundaries – admittedly, very typical features of a function that we like to call “Ondaatje” – before (re)turning to a discussion of the author in *Divisadero*. As I note previously, *The English Patient* presents, for all practical purposes, an “anonymous” narrator, an “ebony pool” that frustrates all attempts to assign a fixed identity or life-story (EP 58). In a fragmented and disruptive personal narrative based around tenuous, dislocated fragments of a central love-story and mystery of identity, the lack of a narratological or autobiographical discursive frame allows other characters to offer meaning according to their more clear-cut identities and stories. In a corresponding manner, *Anil’s Ghost* offers the memories and life-story of Anil. While intermittently also narrating the stories of others, the novel plays with our expectations regarding the story of the prodigal son or daughter and the returning stranger, and simultaneously brings into question our sense of the conventional murder mystery and notions of justice, duty and obligation. Both novels and their fragmented, achronological narratives thus problematise our generic expectations and conventional ways of reading, guided by Ondaatje’s staging of a “novelistic” literary “reality” and shaped by the slippery nature of memory and through metaphorical language.

As the novel’s central protagonist ostensibly narrating most of *Divisadero*, her own story and the stories of others, Anna’s writerly voice and presence cleverly resurfaces in middle of novel. She truly makes herself at home in the vaults of human history “where art meets life in secret” (148), and notes how “[t]hose who have an orphan’s sense of history love history”, and that her voice “has become that of an orphan...” (148). Apart from references to *characters* as orphans, while running away from her father, Anna stops at Colonel Alensworth’s abandoned town; the Hippie Dorn lives in an abandoned hangar in the Jericho Army Base; and card sharps must abandon emotion and hide their stealth from cameras in the sky. *Divisadero* also features the seeming abandonment of one story for other, the most obvious example being the omission of the conclusion of Coop and Claire’s story.

Before we reach part of the narrative in a novel of three main sections, the first of which deals with the interconnection between three quasi-siblings, Anna notes how the trio of herself, Claire and Coop reveal elements of each other’s character as a “three-panelled Japanese screen” (163). “[S]elf-sufficient”, but revealing different qualities or tones when placed next to each other [through memory]”, “[t]heir lives, surely, remained linked, wherever they were” (163). This self-reflexive passage “reveals” how fiction writing enables the writer to materialise symbolic connections between corporal bodies, and how authorship makes possible the “linking” of self-sufficient stories across various dimensions through the novel’s multi-panelled “screen”. Consequently, *Divisadero* reveals how Claire and Anna appear to be two sides of the same coin: while *Divisadero*’s first section discloses Anna as a sexually active female character, Claire is continuously noted as an almost completely de-sexualised presence, one who would one day “marry a centaur” (9). The siblings are both “carefully obsessive” researchers who “tunnel” towards a sense of wholeness and escape in

their lives, while Ondaatje constantly returns through Anna and Claire – not to mention Segura – to the “craft” and process” of writing itself (103). Ultimately, Claire repeatedly “saves” Anna, Coop and others, whereas Anna re-members the forgotten through her archival research and with the ironic distance of time.

An adult “changeling” (16), Claire finds a way to be separate from her previous self, living “two distinct lives” (103). Claire, like Anna, “gets people to talk” (128) as a lawyer’s aid to Aldo Vea in San Francisco: “The work was mostly arduous research, and Vea had walked Claire through the craft and process of it... [S]he would do anything for him” (109). As a tight-knit affiliative group like the once stable Petaluma family, they delve into strangers’ lives; although Claire cannot save Coop, Anna and their father from their own natures, she “save[s] [a man] from lethal injection” (107). When not working with Vea, Claire yearns for a loving father, although “[t]here was no longer a closeness between him and Claire...” (104)

As a “sleuthing” “detective story of the heart” (Burns 2), *Divisadero* unearths how being and becoming who we are cannot be fully disclosed, even in imaginative forms of literature. Since people can become who they are without us knowing *how*, the many random events and chance meetings in Ondaatje’s novels are far more than merely *dei ex machina*. These chance encounters, taking place where the boundaries between the literary and the “real” are most permeable and opaque, speak to the manner in which lives – akin to texts that reflect on life and motion – are “incomplete”, open-ended, and disrupted by “reality”.

Away from her familiar spaces of work and the family farm, Claire cannot believe the coincidence of randomly meeting Coop while on an assignment after taking a dose of sleeping pills: “[...] She went up to him and embraced him... [T]he emotion of seeing Coop invaded her” (112). Before this moment, while fulfilling Dorn’s prophecy that Coop must be wary of women, Coop meets the singer and drug-addict Bridget, a blonde, tall ripple of energy linked to gold (117; 125) and with an “unattainable air” (116) that ensnares him into a near-fatal relationship. In their disjointed, unemotional intimacy, “[s]he would let him fuck her only when she was stoned...” (121). After Bridget suddenly disappears, Coop sees himself “surrounded by the con”, as he realises that “[she] was there only to bring him to Tahoe...” (133-134). Coop “fantasised he might actually see Bridget somewhere, but instead there was Claire... After all these years... (136-137)

Their meeting is hazy and indeterminate, both sure that the *other* is the centre of attention. From Coop’s perspective, Claire is the one in control. Conversely, “in spite of her desire for a contained universe”, Claire feels that life is “scattered” and “without great purpose” (164), a poignant recognition that foregrounds how our lives consist of and are given meaning by a constellation of cumulative moments that betray a greater purpose for our lives. Subsequently, Ondaatje juxtaposes the twin events where Claire acts as saviour towards Coop, the first

being after her father savagely beat him. This memory of Claire saving Coop then contrasts the vicious beating by his captors before Claire finds him. While Coop moves back into the opaque landscape of memory, he relives his time on the farm with Anna and the day she told him to escape the element of fire, which could destroy him:

Cooper lay on his side by the fireplace... She was in Santa Maria, saying, ‘This is for you. There are *five flags*. The yellow one is earth, the green one is water, the red is fire- the one we must *escape*.’ He remembered nothing after that. (138)

These moments in the text bring the importance of the name into sharp focus once more. In the trajectory from *The English Patient*, with the uncertainty around the identities of the English Patient and Katherine fatal for both characters, to *Anil’s Ghost*, where Anil buys her name from her brother, the murdered miner Ruwan Kumara is in death given the name of Sailor, and Anil’s lover Cullis is referred to as a Biggles and a Tinker, *Divisadero* has an equally *ambiguous* treatment of naming. Characters are often confused for other people – some choosing to change or hide their names – and many present without ever being given personal names. While Anna and Lucien Segura write under other pseudonyms, Coop is never properly named, carrying the “Cooper” surname of his dead father, while the name of his and Claire’s adoptive and Anna’s real father is never revealed. Conversely, the characters involved in card play in the novel have invariably been given nicknames: The Hippie, The Brethren, The Gentile. Dorn and Ruth care for Coop and in their beneficence are given real names, while the thief and Aria lack singular names.

*Divisadero*’s designation of names links to the discussion of the workings of the *amygdala* in *Anil’s Ghost*, by tracing research done on the name and verbal accidents by Wendy Doniger. While a “familiar occurrence in the Restoration-like fables of marital life and love affairs”, “*Gotraskhalana* is a term in Sanskrit poetics for calling a loved one by a wrong name, and means, literally, ‘stumbling on the name’” (158-159). Similar to the manner that Ondaatje’s novel is concerned with “fables of marital life and love affairs” as a literary form of escape, the inherent separation between name and subject emerges in the novel. Although longing for a name that signifies their most true self, Anna, Lucien and Rafael’s father are all dislocated subjects seeking to hide beneath the mask of a new name to re-write the course of their lives and the content of their character. Apart from “Cooper” and “Segura”, the absence of family names links to an unwillingness to identify with the father or father’s name; the absence of fathers in the novel and in Ondaatje’s oeuvre although many father-figures abound; and the silenced voices of the fatherly subject. Anna and Claire’s father is never heard, Segura is rarely quoted when speaking directly to his daughters, and Roman as a potential father that loses a child never speaks.

To return to Coop and Claire, she takes Coop home to visit their father, and realises that “[t]his act could be terrible, even brutal. Or it would be generous. All of these things were possible... She wanted to fold the two halves of her life together like a map” (171). By desiring to re-establish a sense of wholeness from fragments, Claire’s statement invokes my earlier points in this chapter and my discussion of cartography in both *The English Patient* and *Anil’s Ghost*, where I consistently argue for the inability of maps to capture any consistent form of truth or full disclosure. Since the narrative “abandons” the outcome and subsequent life-stories of Anna’s affiliative family, we must return to her own story to capture further meaning in the novel. With an “orphan’s sense of history” as an adult researcher, Anna studies how other author-figures have also studied, read and loved in their life-stories, and how artists have influenced each other through the ages: “Georges Wague, who taught Colette mime, taught her two important things... He told her... that mimes live long lives. The second thing he told her she already knew. That there was nothing more assuring than a mask” (148-149).

As researcher and writer, Anna has “changed [her] name” (143), and reflects on human nature while employing such a “masked” subjectivity through her sister’s voice, sometimes “borrowing” Claire’s “careful focus on the world” (143). By “borrowing” from other lives, Anna moves between present and past, between the novel’s rivers and roads and the “novelistic” refrains of embodied existence. After reading an essay “by a writer who was asked to imagine an ideal career” (143), she states: “[The author] replied that he would like to be responsible for just a brief stretch, perhaps two hundred yards or so, of a river... Claire would have safely put her life in that author’s hands” (143).

This revelation mirrors our own investment and trust as readers in the “hands” of the author while we read a book, and invokes the writer as metaphorically “responsible” for a “brief stretch of a river” where various life-stories that coalesce and flow together like different river streams, much like memories and the “intertextual” nature of life itself. Retrospectively, Anna sees how the day that “set fire to the rest of [her] life” (146) could be reduced to a fragment in a work of art, to “something that might occur within just a square inch or two of a Brueghel” (146). Paradoxically, this recognition not only enables Anna to directly conflate the “novelistic”, intertextual nature of art and life itself, but unearths how the novel compresses events and time into a dense, opaque embodiment of motion, “something very small” that nevertheless allows for the possibility of escape. This awareness allows Anna to re-read and revisit her own passion and fear through *memory* and writing. As one moment “sets fire” to the rest of Anna’s life, this metaphor links her to Coop’s discovery of the book as a “Pandora’s box”, and to the personal and political fires characterised in *The English Patient*, while she learns of the potential within art to offer distance and protection from the burning embers of what we think is true:

This is where I learned that we sometimes enter art to hide within it. It is where we can go to save ourselves, where a third-person voice protects us. Just as there is, in the fictional landscape of Paris in *Les Misérables*, that small fictional street Victor Hugo provides for Jean Valjean to slip into, in which to hide from his pursuers. (149)

This crucial passage sheds light on the meaning of the entire novel, as a material and symbolic narrative “landscape”, an itinerant embodiment of various critical and thematic preoccupations that examines the central role of art in our lives. Since “we sometimes enter art to hide within it”, to “save ourselves” with the help of a “third-person voice”, Ondaatje is unequivocally arguing for a concrete place for art and the literary in the “library” of our thoughts and memories, for a permanent recognition of the need for the writer to act as “third-person” protector and raconteur. As corporeal bodies that read for meaning, we are then able to become like Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*, “slipping” into “small fictional streets” to “hide” from “persecution”, able to single out the stories we find most meaningful.

Anna’s archival readings similarly enable her to recognise how (her) character is designated by roots but importantly not *defined* by it:

I come from Divisadero Street. Divisadero, from the Spanish word for ‘division,’ the street that one time was the dividing line between San Francisco and the fields of the Presidio. Or it might derive from the word ‘Divisar’, meaning ‘to gaze at something from a distance.’ (There is a ‘height’ nearby called El Divisadero.) Thus a point from which you can look far into the distance. (149)

By way of this passage and others that are similar, Anna’s “divided” nature and splitting from her previous life in Petaluma is figuratively suggested through the recognition that she “comes from” Divisadero Street, a place of “division”. Resultantly, her status as writer and ability to use language enables her to “gaze at something from a distance” in a novel centrally concerned with forms of connection across space and time. One can trace the “intertextual” sense of relation and connection to other bodies (and bodies of text) to Ondaatje’s earlier metafictional novel, *In the Skin of a Lion*, where familiar characters like Patrick, Hana and Caravaggio are introduced and where the real-life author and poet Anna Wilkinson features as a fictionalised literary character who engages with the thief. After Caravaggio escapes from prison and meets Wilkinson close to water, the writer informs him about a poem she was writing while he observed her in the boathouse: “I have literally fallen in love with the lake. I dread the day I will have to leave it. Tonight I was writing the first love poem I have written in years and the lover was the sound of lake water” (*ISL* 203). Katherine Acheson notes that one of Wilkinson’s most famous poems is in fact “Lake Song” (Acheson, 110).



Apart from drawing intertextual connections between Ondaatje texts and establishing a sense of relativity between nature and culture, writing and living, literal movement and a love of literary movements, the references to “literally falling in love” and writing a “love poem” where the lover is “the sound of lake water” foreground Anna’s falling in love with the Gypsy guitarist Rafael, and the way she delves deeply into the reflective archive of Segura’s loves, thoughts and actions with his help. The connection between *In the Skin of a Lion* and *Divisadero* also helps to make sense of and foreground the ending of *Divisadero*, where Segura as a Lake Poet (recalling Wordsworth among others) and writer inexorably removes the boundary between nature and culture by “dissolving” and drowning in a French lake.

Although Anna remains uncertain as to why she looks deep into the archival “distance” to study Segura’s life-story, she recognises a “familiar” “ruined love”, a “sweet shadow and hesitance” in the irony in the life and voice of a man that despite his name is *never secure*: “His voice with the wound in it kept haunting me...” (149) In a manner analogous to the fact that both the American and French flags feature the primary colours of white, blue and red, and that both countries endured revolution close to each other in 1776 and 1789 and fought in the Great War, these distinctly political and public reverberations of similarity echo in the private and personal life-stories and characters of both Anna and Segura. Anna’s narration moves between reflections on her own wounded life and Segura’s “haunting” voice and life-story, with her name a phonetic a-na-gram and palindrome that speaks to the movement back and forth through memory and the continued (re)drafting of words and stories.

The fact that both Anna and Segura leave their old names behind by assuming new “skins” speaks to a fundamental *chasm* between the embodied, living and individual self, and the function of the name to both individuate and designate our own place in the world, in this case through life-writing. This “place” is intimately connected yet essentially divided and distanced from others, even those that bear the same “marks” or names that we do. Consequently, Anna and Segura both distinguish their previous selves by changing their names and establishing a sense of remove from their own selves. The aperture of the author’s name – an opening and orifice, symbolic space and kind of wound, a disregard for lines of descent and dive into uncharted waters – then opens up inexorable questions of intentionality and authenticity.

Through the excavation of all that Segura could (not) leave behind, Anna delves “below the surface of his work” (67) in some “modest contrapuntal dance with him...” (67). Such a recognition of life-writing as a “contrapuntal dance” not only notes the playful musical quality of writing and life itself, but foregrounds how independent elements or notes become interlinked. Fittingly, Anna and Segura share many similarities in their life stories. Like Anna, Lucien views himself as an orphan; while he has a bond with his stepfather, her biological father raises her. Whereas Anna comes from farm life but chooses to live in another rural

landscape later on, Lucien chooses the rural life purposefully, also subsequently moving to another rural location, while both writers – reclusive, secretive, imaginative, and emotionally wounded – love nature and reading, and have semi-incestuous relationships with near-siblings, Anna with Coop, and Segura with Marie-Neige, a character I discuss below.

Because our own “story” is told *to* an other, it is never really just the story of ourselves, an unproblematic “autobiography”. As other, the addressee is in a sense the person that we make and (re)construct ourselves *for*, the other that determines and directs the kind of self that underpins the world we make in writing. With the mantle of authorship a key with which to escape “reality” into the “literary” machine, Concilio rightly asks, “... isn’t Anna trying to look for what is behind the author’s name?” (18). While fulfilling Hana’s ultimate desire in *The English Patient* to tell her own story, Ondaatje, like Foucault, actively breaks down the boundaries between author and reader, text and context. As I reiterate subsequently, the effect of having two different writers that “hide behind” “*noms de plume*” suggests the dispersion of authority, reinforcing the novel’s avowal of the permeable border where art and life meet.

Anna is “voluntarily effaced” when she enters into the domain of writing as an adult, with her presence deeply embedded within the narrative to remind us that correspondence does not always mean equivalence, that similarity does not always mean sameness, and that reflection is not equivalent to mirroring in every context. Because the novel intentionally undermines our sense of security by alluding to a variety of different generic forms and by ostensibly refusing a singular narrative, we must make sense of their stories by locating them within a particular genre of literary writing, or life-writing. How then does the “proliferation of meaning” (“Author” 119) take place in *Divisadero*? Anna is, as stated earlier, both the novel’s framing narrator and central biographer of Segura’s life-story. Due to the fact that memory is by nature unreliable and the excess of signification is always “fictional” or “novelistic”, and since Anna is a fictional character and scholar both complicit in the writing and telling of her own story and the other stories she narrates, we are compelled to question her neutrality when relating her story. The fact that it is ultimately Ondaatje telling Anna and Segura’s stories adds a further problematic to the equation.

As I mention previously, Anna’s writing helps her to create a new sense of self and style borrowed from her sister Claire’s journal writing. Consequently, under the auspices of a new signature, Anna lives in Segura’s old house and recognises the writer’s need for escape, remembering her *own* life on Divisadero Street: “In some part of her mind, she felt that if worst came to worst, she could always escape back there” (69). Whereas Segura and Anna both write under pseudonyms, this *second* part of novel complicates any binary notions of biography/autobiography and straightforward narration. Together with Anna’s personal sense of transformation, now referred to as “The Person Formerly Known as Anna”, she actively engages in a paradoxical re-membling of the past and of leaving it behind. In the process of

excavating Segura's subjectivity, Anna finds that "[f]or much of his life the man was unknown, save that he was a poet and later the author of a jeremiad about the Great War" (90), and that "knowledge of him has sunk into the fabric and soil of this region" after his death, leaving Segura "almost forgotten by his countrymen" (91).

Although his own people seem to have forgotten him, Anna "loves such strangers to history", whom she deems "essential as underground rivers" (90-91). Akin to the way Claire by chance meets Coop years after their family is split up, Anna meets a "stranger to history" in Rafael, a man who as a young boy knew Segura well, and is a character closely associated with nature and rivers in the text. On a fateful day, Anna walks from her home using an old map. As she pauses to look up at the "splintered beauty" of sunlight "falling" through the trees, she "hears music" (70). It is not coincidental that Anna carries a map and walks toward a kind of discovery, but rather further evidence that Ondaatje views the novel as the perfect vehicle to stage various intersections between bodies and texts, emotions and thoughts, between natural elements like trees, cultural artefacts like maps, and synthetic forms of expression like music.

Reminiscent of how Anna "sees" "splintered beauty" in a forest clearing when looking through the trees, she meets a healing force in Rafael, a kind of archangel in the novel as his namesake suggests. Apart from the fact that feathers literally paste onto his back at one point when he is intimate with Anna, Rafael continues Ondaatje's fascination with music as a kind of narrative, and an interest in musical characters like real-life cornetist Charles "Buddy Bolden", whose fragmented life-story and eventual mental decline Ondaatje traces in *Coming Through Slaughter*. In the following section, I argue that Ondaatje similarly "intertextualises" elements of the life and character of Gypsy jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt that are then subsequently interwoven into the story of Rafael, and that the novel presents music as an ameliorative, embodied and boundary-crossing (meta)language that brings various natural and cultural elements and corporeal bodies together intimately.

Akin to the nature of Anna's sister Claire and the writer Segura, Rafael is close to nature, yet a reclusive outsider without many intimate relationships. As a travelling, "musical" vagabond, Rafael is a "contained man" (72), at home when accompanied by his "tattered guitar" (72), his hands "too lived in, overused" (72). Rafael's scarred hands and "dark fingers" (79) recall the amputated thumbs of the thief Caravaggio in *The English Patient*, Buddy Bolden's "suicide of the hands" in *Coming Through Slaughter*, and the burnt hands of real-life Gypsy jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt. Reinhardt was to be a European jazz pioneer; a man that lived in a caravan similar to Rafael's in France and who found healing in music after a fire in his caravan partially disfigured his hands and cost some loved ones their lives.

To juxtapose its opaque vision of authorship and authority, the novel offers the evocative proposition that music is a kind of metalanguage, an expressive form that both transcends language, genre and discourse to a large extent, and speaks to our distinctly human need for an idiom universally resonant and intensely personal. *Divisadero* discloses how music, much like writing itself, is a symphonic, multi-dimensional and boundary-crossing *performance* of ideas and potentially also feelings shown on a private or public stage, a philosophy of the self and its relation to a wider community in action.

Akin to the writer's arrangement of familiar or traditional elements to offer something novel, the language of music offers a virtually endless stream of consciousness where different yet ultimately propinquitous understandings emerge *without* the necessity of full disclosure. Since improvisation, slippages and forms of "play" inevitably enter the realm of language, musical notes and chords analogously become *more* than a language – a kind of Esperanto if you will – by striking a metaphorical chord with audiences. Because music is "played" and "spoken" through song or instrumentation, the fact that Ondaatje's favoured musical figures in his novels are jazz guitarists are instrumental in foregrounding how he views music as communal and analogous to language, functioning either with or without a singer or the vocal presence of a choir.

Consequently, such a close reading of music underscores our reading of *Divisadero* when we connect the borderless ideal of music to the novel's boundary-crossing nature, and when we link the material and metaphorical dimensions of writing to the fragmented, indeterminate character of memory as an intersubjective autobiographical narrative. In his musical love affair, Rafael's desire for escape is informed by a love for music: "As a boy he had always felt that his musical lessons were a net for holding everything around him... a collective gift, like a hand cupped with cold water held up to a friend" (72). By elucidating Rafael's view of music as a "collective gift", an arresting, captivating form able to capture and contain "everything around him", this passage is one of the novel's many references to boyhood, and the childlike wonder of some of the novel's male characters when they learn from nature or from those wiser than themselves. Correspondingly, Ondaatje does not shy away from the coming-of-age stories of female characters like Anna, Claire and Marie-Neige, where a loss of innocence or form of education or learning links to a relationship with an older man.

With Rafael's penchant for hiding within art reminiscent of the behavior of the sapper Kip in *The English Patient* and archaeologist Sarath in *Anil's Ghost*, he "desires" (91) to be a "bird in flight over the landscape" and a bird's eye view of the world, to "experience" the "petite life on earth" from a distance high above (91). Analogous to Anna's warning to Coop that he must avoid the element of fire, she senses that Rafael has "been burned by something in his past" (76), that [h]e was in fact coming out of [privacy] for the first time with her" (77). Along with the fact that Rafael lost "each wing of protection" (99) after the death of his

parents, this recognition is emblematic of a continuous revelation of Rafael's emergence from darkness into light, and implicitly lays bare how intimate relationships are always contingent upon forms of exposure and marked vulnerability, but also trust and understanding.

Paradoxically, Rafael and Anna become closer physically while remaining emotionally tentative, mirroring the diffidence that marks the relations between Anna and Coop on the cusp of adulthood. "In spite of everything that had existed between Coop and Anna for those two months on the Petaluma farm", in their passionate intensity as young lovers "they'd really been discovering themselves", "remain[ing] mysterious to each other. ..." (92). Consequently, Anna's intimacy with Coop shapes her intimate behaviour with Rafael years later, and "there had always been and perhaps always would be a maze of unmarked roads between her and others" (92). By desiring the "smallest possible space" (80) to let the "truth of her life come out", Anna needs to "hide in a stranger's landscape" to escape from the "the moment of violence that deformed her, all of them", while a "wall of black light holds her away from it" (80-81). This admission sheds light on the fact that her trauma has become a "wall of black light" that makes re-memembering a painful process, and reveals how she is "deformed" more by emotional trauma, left to "hide in a stranger's landscape" such as Hugo's Jean Valjean and in need of "protection" by a "third person" like Rafael.

Within Ondaatje's theory of writing and its relation to subjectivity and intersubjectivity, Anna's writing about Segura and his life while spending time with Rafael allows her to join another subjective world corresponding to her own story. The links between writing and music as resounding, intimate forms of escape into "fictional landscapes", and the "close reading" of nature and other bodies in an ameliorative, corporeal intimacy then allows Anna and Rafael to traverse a "maze of unmarked roads" with a "formality that makes them careful with each other..." (80). For Ondaatje, the gateway between past and present, character and reader never fully closes, with the past "always carried into the present by small things" (82).

Throughout *Divisadero*, we concomitantly become aware of the deepening reflections between the lives of the characters unearthed in the novel's first and second parts. In the sections that cover Anna and Rafael's burgeoning intimacy, we encounter a "repetition" of the first part of the novel's opening *italicised text* (141-142) identifying the "you" addressed as Rafael. Through a linkage between the past and present that counters the "wall of black light" withholding Anna from closure, Rafael functions as the bridge between herself, the natural world and Segura, just as Segura subsequently links to other characters, even in his ultimate death. After taking Anna "back to the middle of that pasture where they first met, he tells her that '[t]his is where the old writer drowned. In the old days there was a small lake here' (82). In a moment of embodied experience where she swims there with Rafael, Anna realises how much of their time together is based around first experiences, "where there seems no boundary between passion and curiosity and closeness..." (93).

Likewise, since Ondaatje gradually reveals a “curiosity and closeness” between various locations and corporeal bodies, Anna comes across “one of her dearest possessions”, “La Carte du Tendre Pays”, an “old map” that materially documents the “emotions that fit into the shape of France” (90). This map is “composed by women in an earlier century, during an era of male exploration and mapmaking” (90-91). Such a discovery not only establishes a further level of connection between the “emotional cartography” present in *Divisadero* and the cartographical inscriptions I discuss in relation to *The English Patient*, but again reveals how gender politics are connected to the gaze, cartography and writing, a view that concomitantly discloses discrepancies between totalizing forms of material inscription like mapmaking, and ameliorative amendments to the self that result from supportive intimate relationships.

As emotions appear to fluctuate and vary while spaces and places reduced to cartographical fragments ironically remain constant, the second part of the epilogue’s italicised text appears again after slight modification at the novel’s end, and compromises our ability to identify the beginning and end of the novel. The second *italicised text* itself depicts the impossibility of drawing clear boundaries between art and life, inflection and reflection, beginning and end concerning life-stories, and introduces a boundary that leads into the telling of Segura’s story in the novel. Right in the middle of the novel, Anna and Rafael come across a meeting place where a “river meets a road and covers it, or from another perspective, where the road has come upon the river and sunk below its surface, as if from a life lived to a life imagined” (167). Fact – “a life lived” – and fiction – “a life imagined” – “seem to mingle in such a way that it becomes impossible to assign absolute authority to either of them or to distinguish them from one another” (De Smyter 104): “They merge, the river and the road, like two lives, a tale told backwards and a tale told first” (167).

With the “merging” of the river and road, and the integration of the life-stories of Anna and Rafael into one, this assertion again illuminates how the novel is able to dramatise how memory functions to give meaning to our lives, by making an embodied story out of our thoughts and experiences that links us intimately to others. Fittingly, Anna stops “thinking”, her tentativeness finally disappears, and she is able to embark on a new life course that flows to include Rafael’s earthy presence: “[H]er hesitation disappeared... Curiosity, courage, it was what they both wished for beneath their pounding hearts” (99). It is suggested that Anna moves closer to Rafael on a physical and spiritual level, forging a self more open to light than the darkness of solitude she experiences previously. When she is described as having “woven the roots of two small muddy plants into her blond hair, so it appears as if mullein and rosemary are growing out of the plastered earth on her head” (188), it appears that Anna is finally able to bridge the divide between the traumatic past and its telling.

As an open-ended, atmospheric narrative, as equally striking in its architectural “air” or formal structure as its exploration of the manner in which autobiography, memory and story band together through the novel, *Divisadero* deals with the ways that the novel is able to join various natural and cultural these elements through various reflective narrative forms. Redolent of this connection of voices and stories and foregrounded by my discussion of Ondaatje’s view of the language of music, arias are a musical form that foreground one singer and various melodies with the backing of an orchestra, in the same way that the novel tells one story while supported by a myriad of others. Ondaatje is thus smart and self-reflexive in naming Rafael’s mother “Aria”, with its etymology being “air”. This insight then foregrounds how the novel’s different chapters and sections are individually meaningful, and how they stand in relation to others in Ondaatje’s collective work.

After sharing fragments of her healing relationship with Rafael, Anna’s authorial voice moves to explore the characters and relationship between Rafael’s father Astolphe/Liebard and Aria. Ondaatje gives the reader a glimpse into their relationship after the Second World, noting that “[t]he war was a *chasm* for most. There was one life *before* and one life *afterwards*” (87, my emphasis). As I discuss previously in my discussion of both *The English Patient* and *Anil’s Ghost*, war for Ondaatje stands as a brutal, anachronistic embodiment of separation and division that never fully allows its victims to heal from their physical wounds and psychological trauma. Before discussing the significance of the fact that Rafael’s father – as someone “conscious of the sacredness of property” (89) – changes his name more than once in the novel, it must be said that the thief is denied any sense of permanence in his relationship with Aria, who refuses to become his lawful wife and declare her faithfulness to him (89). Evocative of how the name of Anil in *Anil’s Ghost* is not her birth name but one she barter for and adopts as an unused second name from her brother, the name of Aria is similarly a Roma name she has *chosen*, used only by her:

The secret name, which is never used but is her truest name ... keeps the true identity of the child from [supernatural spirits]. And the second name, which is a Roma name, is usually used only by them... [T]hat one is Aria. (181)

This passage sheds light on the novel’s overarching emphasis on positive and affirming relationships between mothers and children, while the relationships between fathers and their offspring are characteristically tense and distant. Redolent of how the novel links certain characters to specific elements, for instance Coop links to water, Claire to earth, Anna to fire and Rafael to fire and light, Aria through her Roma name most obviously links to air, to openness, movement and the sky. In a novel that deals with convergence of various natural and cultural elements, it is interesting in this case to note that the Aria’s name takes on the appearance and function of a mask, a public face and façade that hides the true self and character from evil. As I argue previously, the author’s name functions to designate a certain

location of meaning and way into the reading of a life and work, and helps the writer to bring various *textual* elements together under his name, flagging his place in the archive.

Similarly, by seeking to uncover the distance between self and other, nature and culture, body and text, *Divisadero* text suggests an outreach between different bodies to form an affiliative family of displaced subjects as in *The English Patient*. As a key example of such an affiliative group, the entire travelling Gypsy family seem “half dreamt” in their “whimsical” wanderings, culminating in regular swims in the afternoons (182-183). Never stationary and moving periodically, the family meets Segura, who offers them a piece of land in exchange for their help in clearing the fields (188). Consequently, with names “like passwords”, “all of them with a brief lifespan” (189), the thief decides to be known as “Astolphe”:

[...] [T]his time the thief wished that he had owned the name earlier in his life... With such a name it would almost be possible for this thickset man to turn into a three-ounce bird or a subtle grammatical form. (189)

With “a rough grey stubble that made him appear ponderous,” the text’s evocation of Rafael’s father as “the man”, a thief or “filcher” “injured” and uprooted by war that is “not from France”, suggests that he is in fact *Caravaggio*, the thief from *The English Patient* (74). While living a spare life and refusing to be photographed, the thief “appeared uncertain of all things”, “content to reside in a state as humble as a sparrow...” (187). His inner divisions and quiet gentility reflect a distance between various nebulous identities through which to cross borders and “hide” from the world, “uncertain” of a single, true “permanent” identity: “No, I don’t have a name, the husband said... (187). With the border between man and animal crossed again, the capacity of the name to foreclose a stable sense of identity is questioned.

Since questions of authorship, intentionality and ownership inevitably entangle the critical reception of a writer’s work, it is fruitful to note that notions of an authorial presence are usually open to interpretation, while the thief is always at a remove yet intimate with many spaces, conjuring discoveries and creations through ingenuity. By suggesting that all works of writing are intertextual and autobiographical, gradually “collecting” and “borrowing” various storytelling fragments from the real world and the fictional domain, it follows that the author is always a kind of cat-burglar and outsider akin to the thief, one using stealth and ingenuity to create moveable, malleable manuscripts of meaning, a point I make when discussing *The English Patient*’s Caravaggio as author-figure.

In some of his most meticulous writing to date, Ondaatje meditates on the field of literature as a space bringing different elements and forms together to create new areas of exploration and discovery. Cunningly, Ondaatje then *conflates* the figures of the author and the thief, as they present as mirror images. Right from the start, the thief and Segura seem to reflect each



other, with the writer as guarded as a thief, while “each man regarded the other almost as a mirror” (187). Rafael shares an intimacy with his parents, while the young Rafael and Segura draw sustenance from each other. Correspondingly, writing becomes Segura’s way to hear the “birdsong of the world” while “lost in a story” (98), and his teachings as a surrogate father “casually [suggest] to Rafael a path he might take during his own life, and [teach] him how he could be alone and content... fully understanding...” (98-99).

At the same time as author and thief transcend boundaries and become “fully understanding” of others, Rafael experiences the world in a novel way, with time in a “broken state”, no longer ruled by two “hands” on a clock: “Rafael put his head down against the horse’s neck, and he became the animal’s eyes, witnessing the quick choices of direction...” (192-193). The motif of horseriding associated with Claire now carries over to Rafael, and the notion of time as being in a “broken” state constantly reappears in Ondaatje’s textual worlds, as seen in both *The English Patient* and *Anil’s Ghost*. With Rafael’s move through darkness into an illuminating clearing beside a river in a forest, Ondaatje again breaks down the temporal backbone of conventional narrative, how stories can be told, remembered, and listened to.

the third part of *Divisadero* self-reflexively introduces a book into the plot of a book while giving the greatest insights into Segura’s life, and it appears that this section of the novel is thus the part to mine for clues concerning Ondaatje’s attitude towards writers and novels, i.e. the novel and author’s *intentionality*, and the continued importance of storytelling. After exposure to the fragmented life-stories of those whom Anna knows and loves, we travel both sides of the Great War for her excavation and re-membling of Segura’s life-story, one that echoes James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as Young Man*. As a fictional literary figure whose name “Lucien” invokes connotations of “light” and echoes by turns the nature of the titular character in *English Patient* and Palipana from *Anil’s Ghost*, Segura ultimately breaks down boundaries between autobiography, memory and story, ultimately re-reading his own life and lives of others through writing.

In *Acts of Literature*, Derrida’s “Aphorism Countertime” examines the *contradictory* force of naming (in both literal and more general senses) as a cultural practice: “in instituting and enforcing temporal and spatial homogeneity, it brings into being the possibility of the very accidents – including death as we understand it – which it is designed to prevent” (414). In the words of Derrida,

[a] proper name does not name anything which is human, which belongs to a human body, a human spirit, an essence of man. And yet this relation to the inhuman only befalls man, for him, to him, in the name of man. He alone gives himself to this inhuman name. (“Aphorism” 427)

The process of naming thus not only enacts a paradoxical form of *symbolic* de-humanisation or dismemberment, a kind of reductive relation between individuals, but by giving man alone an “inhuman name” offers a *mask* to the self, distorting “human spirit” and “essence”. Since “the name constitutes [something] without being anything of [itself], condemning [subjects and objects] to be what, beneath the mask, they are not, to being merged with the mask...” (432), the author’s body and body of work conflate in the process of living and the imaginative creation of an autobiography. Because the name calls *beyond* presence, phenomenon, light, beyond the day, beyond the theatre” (“Aphorism” 425), lives and texts are more than inherently “novelistic” or “intertextual”, but an embodied and embedded/relational course of action that gather various textual fragments in order to produce more than memories, but *autobiographers*, and, eventually, *autobiographies*.

*Divisadero*’s writerly identities are unconstrained by the border of the name given at birth, reminiscent of the English Patient’s evasive identity and the projection of various personas and roles onto him by those at the Villa. Reminiscent of the manner in which the Patient’s open-ended identity allows him to enjoy an epistemological and ontological status *between* things, the author’s privileged, analogous ability to write from behind a pseudonym or “mask” allows the freedom to move and manoeuvre between different genres, themes, stories and voices. Since the novel is clearly an example of *fictional* autobiography, placing the narrative within a certain autobiographical frame according to the author’s name “impede[s] the free circulation... of fiction” (“Author” 119).

*Divisadero*’s chapter titles offer not only an artificial border or boundary between different sections and different life-stories or ideas, but focus our attention on a paradoxical sense of continuous mirroring between memories and stories. Fittingly, the third part of *Divisadero*, entitled “The House in Demu”, provides a material “location” for the novel’s “house” of thoughts regarding authorship and its relation to intersubjectivity. Before settling in the picturesque Gascony (the home of D’Artagnan from *The Three Musketeers*) and before becoming a fulltime writer, Segura’s life literally follows a literary path as he listens to the stories of strangers on his way from Marseillan to Gers, “enter[ing] their worlds invisibly” (178) while travelling on a horse-drawn cart. After fame dawns, the “solitary” Segura starts to project a “mask” onto the world that “[gives] him space, and a border” (179), and starts to write under a pseudonym that we are not exposed to. Ondaatje is self-slyly and reflexively using another fictional writer to talk about the cost of fame, the rigours of remaining solitary, and the need to project a mask onto the world in order to survive.

By offering a fictional account of the manner in which writers assume different “skins”, “masks”, “identities” and “names”, Ondaatje displaces the singular and privileged position of the “Author God”, to use Foucault’s suggestive phrasing. Reminiscent of the manner in which the “complete truth” unearthed through memory and story remains elusive, *Divisadero*

discloses how the writer invents and names a novel yet fragmented world simultaneously reflective of the outside world and the machinations of discourse it functions under. Through a personal, poignant investigation of the implications of living to *write* and of writing in order to truly *live*, Ondaatje's writings disclose the roaming, roving movement between actual locations and embodied memories, and the perpetually unsettled subjectivity and status of both (fictional) writers and the novel's dislocated characters as variations of the author-figure.

As it does for the blind epigraphist Palipana, "space" or distance from the outside world gives Segura the "border" to construct (fictional) realities. Segura immerses himself in the womb-like space of writing in a manner analogous to the science writer Cullis, another married man having an affair, while akin to the English Patient he is adept at finding metaphorical locations of meaning through memory and literal spaces of water. In a foreshadowing of his suicide disclosed on the novel's very last page, Segura "strips down" and "slip[s] into" the cold, reflective water after "coming upon" a "small lake" (179). This mirrors how Ondaatje's novel "strips" the authorial process to its "raw truth", and exposes the continuously "effacing" process of narrative craft.

By immersing herself in fragmentary recordings of Segura's life and thought-process, Anna finds archival recollections on the craft of his clockmaker stepfather and their "strange breed", and Segura's insistence that he has "studied their natures" (199), included by Ondaatje to underscore the playful and self-reflexive art and artifice of *his* work. These passages in *Divisadero* evoke similar metafictional commentary and the elucidation of the paradoxically sacred and profane character of fiction writing provided in particularly the scenes that describe the Netramangala ceremony of *Anil's Ghost*. Since Ondaatje argues that the writer and artist have a certain depth of perspective when giving material shape to the intangible, the languors of clockmaking in the novel – its intimacy and careful composition – speak of a love for the "performance of a craft" and its "secret rehearsals" (200).

After Segura's father leaves his Spanish mother never to return, she marries the clockmaker, and Segura becomes close to his stepfather. At the tender age of four, the boy acquires the ability to "distinguish the voices of each field... which section of the sky to search for stars during different seasons and which tree it was that held a nightingale" (203). Another example of the text's multiple refrains of boyish wonder presents itself, and the clockmaker's sudden death leaves Segura without a father. The boy retreats, becoming more cautious and secretive" (204). The arrival of the recently married peasant couple Roman and Marie-Neige who come to live next to door shuttles Segura into the world of adolescence and a communal universe where his "whole life" changes: "The boy had been reading the Greek epics and in that moment these strangers felt to him like part of a foreign army or delegation..." (206). This passage captures the angst of youth, where reading about "foreign armies" acts as a specific lens through which to view the "reality" of "small moments".

By standing as “a monument to the joys of storytelling and reading” (McGill 19), understanding in *Divisadero* results from a particular mode of (re)reading, with the novel’s key reading relationship between Segura and Marie-Neige. After discussing an initial relationship where the younger Segura enraptures the slightly older Marie-Neige with Picaresque adventures of mistaken identity, secret lives and questions of fate and honor, I argue that the novel puts forwards a form of close reading based around the recognition of individual subjectivity. This is highly reminiscent of *The English Patient*, mirroring the exposition of the seductive power of words, the undercutting of violence and trauma through gestures of care, and an intimacy between writer, reader and character.

Since they grow up away from city spaces, Segura and Marie-Neige rush headlong into Picaresque novels “stuffed by unbearable love”(208), listening to a “drug of stories” as they “[sit] together on the porch or within shade of the dwarf apple tree by the river...” (208). With storytelling as a hypnotic “drug”, Segura reads patiently to Marie-Neige “as if speaking in tongues, with such adult knowledge he was like someone wise who had been wounded in a distant battle or by a passion” (209). Consequently, with Segura and Marie-Neige like “two flammable matches side by side in a tinderbox” (210), she engages in “coupling and mutual satisfaction” with her husband Roman, recognising the sustaining reflection of Dumas’ musketeer *Porthos* “once or twice” while a love-triangle of sorts develops: “[...] [S]he saw his personality in the musketeer, Porthos, and had even seen the possibility of Porthos in him, and that was her way of remaining faithful to all Roman believed in” (211).

This conflation of art and life is what allows her to “remain faithful” to Roman while closer to Segura, the reality of Roman’s experiences ironically offering her a romantic realism that her flights into the Picaresque with Segura cannot. Similarly, the ability to recognise *shared* desires in *Divisadero* is intimated paradoxically by the condition of blindness. In the second of the novel’s vignettes of animal attack, Segura is partially blinded in his seventeenth year by a dog that jumps through glass, carrying splinters that “spear his eye” (213). Resultantly, with Segura’s partial blindness an echo of the blind Mr Rochester in Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, this foregrounds “the beginning of the fractured love affair that will haunt his life, and the works of fiction he will create, in secret, to resurrect a vanished passion” (Wadell 3).

After his time in hospital, Lucien returns to the world with “a cold anger” as “the only emotion allowed in response to the accident” (214-215). Segura is initially hesitant to let Marie-Neige read to him, but eventually gives in to the joys of reading, becoming selfless and compassionate in the process. While reminiscent of the mutually beneficial and healing reading relationship between the English Patient and Hana, Marie-Neige becomes so interpellated that the stories they read together had become hers now” (218). Transfixed by storytelling beauty, Marie-Neige is equally fascinated by Segura’s physical maturation and transformation as he labours in the fields, “with the sureness she would never have” (218). At

the same time as Segura and Marie-Neige grow more intimate through *reading*, Ondaatje juxtaposes their wide-eyed reading with the austere physical passion between her and Roman, whom she met at a fair. After they marry, Roman's murder of another man forces them to seek refuge as "siblings" (219). Constantly travelling, they paradoxically grow ever closer as places they visit become further apart, while "the lack of privacy and the seeming sin of brotherly love that surrounded the act made the tension...magnificent" (224, 225).

At his own wedding, Segura himself realises that Marie-Neige had "chosen Porthos amongst the musketeers" (228). He realises that he must "take his own work seriously" (229) while walking a tightrope of longing for Marie-Neige with an "abyss" (229) between his home and hers. Following upon his newfound fame, Segura retreats into solitude, "like a creature who had slipped into a mistaken garden of celebrity" (231). After losing the "crucial part of himself that allowed him to feel secure" (232), he recoils further into the literary world, while "essays" of his difficult, "disfigured" nature abound (232). At the same time, his daughters Lucette and Therese become enmeshed in a game of hidden passions and "anarchic" truth reminiscent of the feelings between the siblings on the Petaluma farm: "His daughter Lucette, now twenty-two, was engaged to Henri Courtade. His nineteen-year-old daughter, Therese, was being courted by the young poet Pierre Le Cras" (229).

While looking on these events from a "parental height", separated from his daughters and after separating from his wife, Segura is a "splintered creature" (239) that desires within writing's "space of emergency" to gather the "thrill of diversity", with the page "a pigeonier flown into from all the realms one had travelled through" (239). Ondaatje dissolves the boundary between literary character and reader of literary fiction by providing concrete yet clearly fictional incidents bearing witness to literary characters "throwing the book" at others, being on the "same page", "reading others like a book", and viewing life as an "open book", and immerses readers in a metatextual world we can only witness in our mind's eye.

Segura "travels" through fictive immersion and creation with the page such a "pigeonnier" or "mark", with the symbolic "realms" of travel are evoked in Roman's renovation of the belfry, a "twisted tower" mentioned when Anna enters France that recalls the Petaluma water-tower (135-136). Reminiscent of the reconstruction of the Buddha statue in *Anil's Ghost*, Roman's creative labour allows for an embodied consciousness that transcends the barriers between the natural and cultural. This embodied sense of perception resultantly reflects in narrative fragments that relay his horse-riding exploits: "[...] [H]e let go off the reins so the horse selected its own route... For those minutes, lost under the shifting world, he was a boy, doing what he had done as a boy..." (243). Lost under "reins" of power that excludes those like him, Roman reads the sounds of nature and studies gestures with a magnified sense of meaning, with birdsong the "great mystery he had come to love" (244).

In his journeys across France, Roman is similar to *Anil's Ghost's* Sarath in his fascination with the earth, while his resentment towards the political order of the world results in similar tragedy. Poised at the top of the belfry, Roman sees the shape of Marie-Neige, but does not know why she comes to see him, with news that she has fallen pregnant (246-247). After Roman attacks a man and is taken to jail before he could see Marie-Neige, she subsequently has a miscarriage a month later, and the novel comes full circle in its evocation of the transience of life. After her traumatic loss, Segura's caring gesture of giving land they lived on in Marseillan to Marie-Neige recaptures the spirit of alignment between them. As they sit at the blue table, a space of intimate familiarity later to be remembered as his most prized possession, Lucien reads to Marie-Neige the terms of the transfer, "blind" to their differences: [S]he had known automatically which of the two chairs to sit in. It was so his good eye would be next to her and could share in the page they read together, while the other eye – his blindness, at all their differences in this life – was far from this intimacy (251).

After this watershed moment of "intimacy" and alignment, it is ironic that Segura's "partial sight" saves him from conscription to The Great War. Nevertheless, he is diseased in his own way, becoming "another person" that "volunteered instead to be part of a commission that studied disease and trauma along the battle zones near the Belgian border..." (255). Segura is buried in the barrage of bodies spread over the French landscape. After catching diphtheria in the war's second year, "everything in him fought to overcome the exhausting pain..." (255-256). While he "swallows" volumes of story just like Hana in *The English Patient* and Gamini in *Anil's Ghost*, "[t]he solitude at Epernay gradually released him from the everyday world" (257), and "maps of sound" teach him "to locate distances, to distinguish a footstep on mud as opposed to dust, or whether a voice was moving towards him or away" (257-258).

Marie Neige dies during the last months of the war, and Segura finds no record of Roman in prison records. An isolated Segura then immortalises Marie-Neige and Roman in his novels, portraying his great love and her husband as a fictitious heroine and hero in the style of Dumas, where there is often a "finite love or an unrecognised affection" (275). "Where art meets life in secret" (143), Marie-Neige's ethereal presence is embedded "halfway through a book", and "she entered the story sometimes as a lover, sometimes as a sister" (274-275), while we are informed humorously that "[Roman] never seemed to be fully understood by his author, and so no one could ever be sure of him, not even his accomplices (274-275).

As intertextuality, reading between the lines and self-reflexivity act as coordinates and guiding lights towards elliptical revelation or *full disclosure*, *Divisadero* concludes with Anna and Segura on a precipice in their own lives. With Marie-Neige "carried" as a part of Segura's corporeal body, "remembered in his stories" (278), he ultimately moves into the countryside on a horse-drawn cart never to write again, carrying his "ghost" within him, akin to those in *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost*. 'We have art', Nietzsche says, 'so that we

shall not be destroyed by the truth.’ For the *raw truth* of an episode *never ends*... (279, my emphasis). Within the function of art as “protection”, the never-ending story of the events of our lives and ourselves is replayed repeatedly in our minds. As the narrative(s) of *Divisadero* come full circle, memory allows for a return to the novel’s earlier narratives, travelling to unmapped destinations in the text and our own lives. By mapping the lives of others and that of the self, Ondaatje shows memory is able to “circle time” as a “gate that “opens both ways”, how “a paragraph or an episode from another era will haunt us in the night, as the words of a stranger can”, and how the “hunger” for community, acceptance and understanding, for “what we do not have”, that “holds us together” (281).

Held together by a “shared hunger”, the pages of the novel become the collective and collected material location where we imagine what lies beyond us. After completing his life’s journey, Segura’s retreat into the natural world is a fitting final act, much like Palipana’s *gesture*. Ready to become one with the earth, “he [sees] he had used up his life... [What] Lucien wants now is a storm” (283-284). Whereas Anne Michaels’ *The Winter Vault* contends that “[r]egret is not the end of the story; it is the middle of the story” (384), *Divisadero*’s haunting and evocative final passages paradoxically yet similarly suggest a fleeting sense of narrative closure and indeterminacy, while imitating life in its fateful ellipsis

[...] A girl travels down the long California valley in a commercial refrigeration truck, hardly able to speak, as a result of her fear or her bravery, listening to every word of the good stranger. Lucette in Paris sips absinthe with her lover. The boy Rafael will meet me, a woman from the New World... And Coop? And Claire? Will these children, in their eventual cities, turn out to be the heroes of their own lives? (284)

Whereas *The English Patient* informs us of the suicide attempts of Sarath’s wife Ravina and that of Ananda, the continuous “death” of the English Patient, Lord Suffolk, Geoffrey and Katherine Clifton, *Anil’s Ghost* presents us with moving accounts of Palipana’s and Gamini’s deaths. Similarly, we are informed of the passing of Lydia Mendez and Rafael’s mother Aria, along with a poignant and affecting account of the last moments of Lucien Segura’s life, while continuously alerted to the thanatoid nature of Ondaatje’s chronicles. Since the narrative function of forms of death allow Ondaatje the latitude to comment on the nature of the writer in *Divisadero*, the opaque middle-distance between a novelistic “reality” and fictional representation allows Anna and Segura to *live*, to stand outside their own discourse. They find their “*Raison d’être*” between the personal and impersonal, dramatised by the use of “I”, “he”, “she” and “we”, “them” and “they”, “him” and “her”, fulfilling the texts’ transgressive potential to unite separate yet similar characters.

In the novel's evocative final moments, Segura climbs into a boat that is akin to a "floating skeleton", spare and unadorned (285). At peace with himself like the burnt explorer in his final hours, Segura's final "gesture" reverberates back to the English Patient's rescue in the desert by Bedouin on boat made of "felt and palanquin" (*EP* 9). Parallel to that Anna and Rafael's departure from the symbolic darkness of the forest to be closer to understanding each other and the world – in itself reminiscent of Mervyn Ondaatje in *Running in the Family* – Segura "comes out from the shadows of the trees" (273), immersing himself into the lake and at peace while "[s]ome birds in the almost dark are flying as close to their reflections as possible" (285): "He wants to stand, to see everything clearly... [A] board cracks below him, like some crucial bone in the body that holds sanity, that protects the road out to the future. His gaze holds on to this last, porous light" (285).

Is it not the purpose of the best art and literature to "hold on" to porous" forms of light, and to "fly as close as possible to its own reflection", recognising its unique ability to achieve a transcendence of boundaries and divisions between form and content, art and life, fact and fiction? With the lines on its pages reminiscent and reflective of a fluid writing process, the novel's reflective, womb-like space absorbs the "ink" of the "pen" to harness (yoke, bind, connect and exploit) the reflections between different lives, helping us to connect intimately and closely to others in the real world. With the writer's privileged voice able to dramatise the (dis)connections between the novel as intimate witness to individual lives and how these lives unfold like the reading and writing of texts, *Divisadero's* intricate layering of loss and triumph of the imagination unearths the trompe l'oeil of memory, the ways that life-stories are part *lived* and part *imagined*.

Ondaatje recognises the impossibility of fully connecting the divided sign and subject, nevertheless revealing the continuous connections that exist between human beings, between reader and text, strengthened with each successive re-reading. By reinforcing Chagall's insistence that "[g]reat art picks up where nature ends", *Divisadero* "arrest[s] motion, which is life, by artificial means" (Faulkner), and illuminates how "[a]ll the best stories in the world are but one story in reality – the story of escape" (Benson). With new life behind the truism of reading a book from "cover" to "cover", mindful of the tension between *forgetting* and remembering, the domain of autobiography and parameters of life-writing are quintessentially the province of personal and private recollections, capturing paradoxically both an inexpressible essence, and liberating us from all that cannot be left behind. We are then able to "sit still", "turn the page backwards" and gather "moments" and "fragments of memory" in the novel's "underground pool" (Ondaatje *ISL* 148). As an imagined community of readers, we are bound by recognition, tied together by transience, set free by shared desires. The "raw truth" of our lives never ends; we forever travel on the pathways of the river and the road.



## Conclusion

### “Communal Histories” and “Communal Books”

In the introduction or first chapter of this dissertation, I set out to introduce the motivation for my dissertation, focusing on the particular elements of Ondaatje’s work I find resonant with my own interests, and briefly discussing the ways in which others have read his work. While motivating the need for my study within current Ondaatje criticism, I locate my own discussion of *The English Patient*, *Anil’s Ghost* and *Divisadero* within a broadly post-structuralist frame, but also explain how Ondaatje’s novels and my own views of his work strain *against* any form of rigid and dogmatic critique from one critical perspective. After presenting a literature review and delineating my research methodology, I trace the context of the writer’s work, his own reflections in interviews, and critical scholarship on the relationship between bodies, texts and contexts. This ultimately enables me to argue that Ondaatje is centrally concerned with a meditation on narrative craft and the importance of the literary, and that he uses the novel’s heteroglot, border-crossing nature to comment on real world issues through an examination of various intimate relationships and performative forms of expression.

In chapter 2, I argue that Ondaatje’s metafictional writing is both intimate and corporeal, an exploration of the ways in which close relationships in the fictional domain reflect intimacies in the “real world”. Since the relationship the novel establishes with each reader becomes the lens to make sense of all the *other* relationships in *The English Patient*, where the familiarity between text and reader allows the observation of intimacies between characters, the novel in this sense does not just describe the harmful or ameliorative affiliations between people in the fictional domain; it actively *performs* such a connection, or a particular embodied idea of such a connection. I then contend that a close reading of the bonds between people in fiction thus attends, for Ondaatje, on entering an analogous, intimate bond with the text in reality.

I proceed to delineate how Ondaatje discloses two things to make the analogy persuasive. First, he shows the reader that the other is, at some level, a text that must be read closely in order to be identified, and that a certain practice of textual interpretation mediates and occasions the intimacies between real corporeal people in the world. Second, Ondaatje illuminates how that a fictional text – which includes the novel *The English Patient* – is at some point *more* than just intangible or allusive meaning, but proceeds from, and relates to, another embodied person, or to other bodies. To read and interpret a book is thus to enter into a deeply personal relationship with another body. This chapter is largely preoccupied with showing, through a detailed close reading of the interconnected themes of (re)construction, reading and relation, how Ondaatje develops and sustains this powerful analogy, and discusses its implications.

By discussing how Ondaatje writes about history as “apocryphal story” – a combination of the hidden, submerged and not officially sanctioned with the legendary, unconventional, fictional and mythical – I note Ondaatje’s privileged ability to comment on history and culture, acknowledge his critique of histories that serve power, and acknowledge that Ondaatje clearly recognises the value of *fiction* to illuminate truth and meaning. By reading the novel, clearly a fictional account, as in some way preoccupied with historical truth in a more profound way than orthodox history, I examine how *The English Patient* represents a novelistic and apocryphal re-writing of history as a distinctive, multi-textured and textual artefact connected to the Apocrypha, the gospels left out of official versions of the Bible. By excavating esoteric and non-canonical subjects – real people subjected to a form of power but that also speak, and by excavating fictional characters – the novel’s intimate reading of bodies, texts and landscapes and signposting of reading as a gradual process much like *living*.

The novel’s open-ended reading and writing practices, emblematised by its criss-crossing between various stories, locations and characters, not only reflects but performs Ondaatje’s views regarding authorship, notions of reading and writing in *The English Patient* to suggest *more* than the reading and writing of various texts, and self-reflexively dramatise the novel’s reflective (meditative, connective) role as “a mirror walking down a road” (97). Since I argue that the novel thus discloses an “emotional shift” in Ondaatje’s work towards a more “sociable” understanding of the self, this intersubjectivity extends to the larger, more abstract categories of community and nation. While war isolates characters, their shared trauma ironically creates the grounds for relation to others – demonstrated in the novel’s forms of connection, familiarity, intimacy and knowledge. Correspondingly, since a form of relational living in the novel’s fictional reality ties to the valorisation of the *civil* – the social, communal and universal – the novel performs its conception of relation as kinds of (af)filliative connections that link subjects and subject matter in the text, establishing a relative impression of history, memory and individual story.

Ultimately, I assert that *The English Patient* argues for the close reading and (re)construction of individual stories in relation to others through intertextual and supplementary reflection. Ondaatje’s novel shifts between three main environments – the Villa San Girolamo, the space of the desert and the garden space – in order to demonstrate communal understanding and ethical relations between characters. The plurality of experience, the embodied nature of reading and intimacy, and the opacity of consciousness in *The English Patient* can then show how Ondaatje’s individual stories form part of a larger embodiment of communal understanding, an intimate vision of a personal and humane politics of location and locatedness that performs an ultimately ethical relation to history and subjectivity.

In Chapter 3, I argue that Ondaatje's trauma/witness writing about the Sri Lankan Civil War between 1983 and 2009 discloses a personal rather than political version of recent history that investigates the nature of trauma that characterises such events. I propose that one of the signal strengths of the novel form in this regard is that it is able to demonstrate the personal experience of trauma; the way trauma is experienced firstly as both a physical and psychological event that affects the psyche of the individual, a shock to the subject's intimate knowledge of self and world. At the same time, I point out that the novel can insist on trauma as communal and political: in fact, it has the ability to chart precisely this close connection between subjective interiority and the outside world, to show how political terror becomes a private nightmare, and the way private nightmares are always already situated in the intersubjective political domain. The need for closure, for some transcendent meaning or truth to ameliorate the spectacle of suffering, becomes particularly pressing.

In order to present a sensitive close reading of experience facilitated through an aesthetic form, the novel then gathers more than the fragments of a *single* story to perform a palimpsestic overlaying of corporeal human voices through various fragmented yet inter-connected stories. Consequently, Ondaatje's historical writing occasions the propinquity of various individual stories to show how fragments of trauma and loss coalesce to represent an aesthetic and ethical quilting of voices, without ultimately (re)constructing an authoritative truth and knowledge. While speaking back to trauma through a collection of closely intertwined and disembodied voices of a variety of author-figures, *Anil's Ghost* ultimately suggests a vision of one shared fate, a communal vision of truth and knowledge, and a valorisation of the intimate, local and aesthetic as timeless answers that address personal and public trauma in the real world. In order to sustain such an argument, I look closely in this chapter at the ways in which the novel's intentionally fragmented form and content can in fact be viewed as closely intertwined, and how the novel's writing of history represents a cast of traumatised fictional characters whose fragmented relationships, stories and experiences reflect (on) the fragmented process of trauma/witness writing.

I continue to argue that Ondaatje employs the novel as a functional and fictional material unity. In addition to its representative and fictionalising qualities, the novel is a material object that enjoys a corporeal existence in the world. It is precisely because of its unity as a material object that the novel is able to perform the gathering of various stories into one book of related content, allowing us to see various fragmented, corporeal wounds and personal trauma in a way that brings both forms of injury together *without* privilege. By bringing into the open the "novelistic reality" between fact and fiction, text and history, and by inserting the names of real subjects into fiction, this technique not only heightens the novel's credibility as fiction that reflects real trauma, but foregrounds the lives of the disappeared in order to make visible that which would normally remain undisclosed.

As response to such terror and dislocation, *Anil's Ghost* unveils the ethical pressures and responsibilities that arise as inextricable components of the bonds and intimate relationships that we form with others. The syncretic textual representation of such different close relationships under conditions of extreme violence in turn makes the novel's evocation of material restoration possible. Ultimately, to discuss the novel as an open-ended form of trauma/witness writing where the fragmented form and content gradually enable a relational symmetry, I recognise how the individual vignettes in *Anil's Ghost* resonate as part of a greater (re)constructive vision on Ondaatje's behalf. By voicing a coming through trauma through fictional representations of the intimate, local, ethical and communal, the novel concludes with a powerful and commanding material restoration – both individually and communally significant – that counters the dislocation of the real Sri Lankan population.

Chapter 4 argues that *Divisadero*, as a densely written, distinctly private novel that documents the life-stories of a diverse cast of characters, is akin to the works of Modernist writers such as Joyce and Forster, and that it forms part of a firmly established literary preoccupation where key events shatter many lives and echo across them. Because a novel represents a world, but also *organises* it according to its own technologies, it emphasises certain things and deemphasises others within the parameters of genre, and serves the (technical) needs of narrative. The provocative notion of the novel as a material and imaginative collection of emotions, thoughts and ideas (intangible matter), and a gathering of physically expressive actions and forms of intimacy (embodied relationships with the world and other bodies) that reshapes the world, is founded upon a view of the world as a fragmented and fragmenting place consisting of and constructed out of subjective meeting points and corporeal subject matter. Since the world that we encounter in the novel starts to shape the world that we inhabit, or starts to shape our *consciousness* of the world, and because real social and historical conditions inevitably influence the ideas expressed in the novel, this foregrounds a reciprocal yet indeterminate relationship between novel and world. Ultimately, we then construct our *own* kind of narrative, cutting and pasting with the help of art a coherent version of self and world onto our own perceptions.

To make this analogy persuasive, I focus in this chapter on the closely interrelated concerns of memory and story, and the ways in which these focus points help to direct a close reading of the novel as a kind of *fictional autobiography*. By following Derrida to argue that all writing rests on autobiography (a notion derived from Friedrich Nietzsche's idea that all "philosophical" writing is always already a form of autobiography), such a reading shows how "real" life and "fictional" novels are intimately connected by their narrative qualities. Such an argument also reveals how our intimate relationships with other bodies contextualise and co-author the "textual" nature of life as an embodied story, and illuminates how the "intertextual" nature of life itself in time produces autobiographers and, eventually, autobiographies. With forms of understanding stemming from the close reading of the other's

life-story, the “reading” of others and the writing of our own life “book” becomes the healing enterprise that sutures life’s inexorable fragmentation and irreconcilable divisions.

I ground my reading of *Divisadero* within the view of the novel as a fictional text with a sustained interest in boundaries, both as meeting places and marks of division. This central interest comes across, as in Ondaatje’s other works of fiction, as the division between geopolitical places in the real world and the apocryphal, boundary-crossing world of the novel, while these boundaries also figure in the affiliative but also divisive relationships between family, friends, readers and writers. Ultimately, through a continual focus on autobiography, memory and story, the novel is most interested in the superordinate category that encompasses all the others, the connection between fiction and life.

This connection is revealed through representations of the fundamental relationship between the author as “function of the narrative” and the author as a corporeal body, a *real person* with ethical commitments who lives in the real world: in other words, between the “autobiographical” world of the author or the self, and the “fictional” world, which both belongs to him and in a sense escapes him. Since our world is a substantial material environment simultaneously all around us yet never fully controlled or understood, our experiences and relationships are coloured and “created” by our own subjective vantage points. Correspondingly, my argument is that the *novel* as a parallel material book that analogously records and re-members life-stories through a form of autobiography embodies Nietzsche’s dictum that “we have art so that we shall not be destroyed by the truth” (279), protected from the “raw truth of events” (279).

By painting life as a kind of *chiaroscuro* (a paradoxically vivid monochromatic picture coloured by different yet ultimately similar experiences), and by dramatising art as an *archipelago* (literally a fluid body of water conjoining many different yet connected islands), Ondaatje suggests that we engage with others in an itinerant, interconnective and communal project to read and make sense of the negatives of private memory and personal history, and that the *liquid* status of the writer, positioned between states of (dis)connection, dramatises this ability *par excellence*. Centrally concerned with the necessarily fictional nature of autobiography due to its “partial vision” (255), Ondaatje’s analysis investigates the sleight of hand involved in the authorial process. In this process, various reconstructions – that of an old cabin, a water tower, different clocks and a belltower – mirror the ways that we “author” our lives through our relationship to the world and intimate relationships with others. Redolent of his writing in *The English Patient* and *Anil’s Ghost*, *Divisadero* concomitantly locates the genitive domain of the family as a site of violence and loss, as a contested terrain where a sense of intimacy, familiarity or nearness is deeply problematic.

Consequently, as a tentative response to emotional and physical destruction, the author offers various forms of affiliative connections – forms of kinship not contingent upon relations of blood or familial relations. Since all of *Divisadero*'s characters are essentially emotionally wounded and enigmatic, their intimacy – often enabled through self-revelation or storytelling – is especially important and revealing. Ultimately, intimate gestures of reading, listening, and care in the novel suggest that the other as a kind of text with its own autobiographical traces must be read closely, just as the reader continuously revives real memories and immortalises fictional texts through re-reading and storytelling.

Within the concentric structure of Ondaatje's embodied metafiction, the movement across time, space and place is kaleidoscopic yet breathtakingly intimate, the narrative craft of Ondaatje's finely wrought novels like that of the reconstructed Buddha statue in *Anil's Ghost*, and the renovated belfry and water tower mended with great care in *Divisadero*. Since it would do his sensitive, carefully constructed novels a great disservice to misread them or be open to limited interpretations, we must approach his work both with a long-distance gaze and a forensic eye for detail; just as Ondaatje insists that we are "communal histories" and "communal books" (*English Patient* 234), his novels resonate communally when read as one text, one *thesis*. Analogously, Ondaatje's wounded, humane characters ultimately come together through both the archaeologist and artist's ability to find beauty in the vestiges of violence and fragments of ruin, and the scientist's gift to identify "permanent truths".

True to life, it appears that the only "permanent truths" Ondaatje desires to reveal in his fiction are the paradoxes inherent in everyday existence. Ondaatje's works disclose how there has always been passion in slaughter, that creation and destruction are strange bedfellows, that beauty and horror are not mutually exclusive, and that communities can be forged through individual terror and mass murder as much as through intimate and ethical relationships and a mutual recognition of humanity. The author encourages the imagination of the reader to colour in the landscapes of the unspoken, to draw links between the novels that strengthen and connect the individual texts to a triumvirate of textual topography.

Given the central focus on the body and the analogy that our lives are ultimately defined by our intimate relationships with others, the crescendo of the corporeal in Ondaatje's oeuvre reaches its summit and peaks. Ondaatje has created a novel form of writing that appeals to the senses as much as to the beating heart, with words that gather a feeling of intimate loneliness, reminding us of our own mortality as individuals. Aware of the distance rendered by postmodern literary devices and the irony of history, the plurality and community of art is the closest thing presented to us as truth. In our contemporary epoch characterised by its lack of certainties, where the flammable realities of terror, isolation and environmental destruction burn with renewed fire, the truth of art and the flames of creativity continue to break the boundaries between author and reader, self and world, fact and fiction. Now as much as ever

before, the need exists for an authorial voice to reach out, to illuminate with clarity the darkness and light, hope and sorrow, fragmentation and regeneration characteristic of our world today.

As a tentative answer to the dichotomies and fragmentation that for Ondaatje characterises being human, the master-narrative of “Michael Ondaatje” presents in a multitude of mesmerising interconnected refrains; by reading the author’s “communal books”, the reader enters a novelistic reality that exposes *the truth of our times*, worlds both fiercely foreign and frighteningly familiar. We cannot simply look at the texts from a distance or interpret with a long-distance gaze, but must respond from within and with an eye view for detail, texture and substance. With linguistic colour as important as the choice of textual canvas, we are privileged to witness a true artist at the height of his craft, a personal exhibition only the gesture of reading away. Words are Ondaatje’s power, the wisdom in his novels ultimately ours as communal books.

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